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# An Awkward Companion: Disability and the Semantic Landscape of English *Lame*

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## Abstract

This article proposes a history of the English word *lame*, based on quantitative and qualitative evidence from twentieth-century corpora. A path of semantic development is proposed for *lame* in the twentieth century, from concrete contexts with animate referents to abstract contexts with inanimate referents and abstract contexts with human referents. While *lame* does participate in the universal tendencies of semantic generalization and subjectification, its participation in contextual generalization is skewed by the strong discursive power of its most common concrete use, human disability. It is suggested that the abstract meanings of *lame* are the result of the crystallization of frequently occurring inferences surrounding human impairment and disability.

## Keywords

semantic change, disability, stigma, frequency, semantic prosody

## Introduction

### *The Story of Lame*

When the word *lame* is evoked in the context of linguistics, many researchers no doubt recall Labov's now-classic 1973 study on "the linguistic consequences of being a Lame," where "lames" were "relatively isolated individuals" in New York City African American youth groups. But why were these social isolates referred to as "lames"? Of course, the "lames" in Labov's study were not "crippled through injury to, or defect in, a limb" (*Oxford English Dictionary* [OED] Online 2007) but rather socially "lame," "inept, naive, easily fooled; *spec.* unskilled in the fashionable behaviour of a particular group, socially inept" (OED Online 2007), as in (1) and (2).

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- (1) *Lame*, square, but not beyond redemption. If you're *lame*, man, you can learn. (*N.Y. Times Magazine*, 25 June 1967, 39)
- (2) ugh. do it. woo. alright everybody's through the fountain. watch out, there's (xx) (xx) oh yeah. Tina's *lame* she won't do anything. it's not that cold, it's not that cold. (Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English [MiCASE], TOU999JU030, 1998)

In (1) and (2), *lame* has an abstract meaning associated with human referents. The use of *lame* in such contexts was not attested until 1942, as a slang term: "1942 BERREY & VAN DEN BARK *Amer. Thes. Slang* §491/9 *Easy to take, lame, soft, . . . easily victimized*" (OED Online 2007), as in "1972 J. WAMBAUGH *Blue Knight* (1973) vi. 93 They're a couple of *lames* trying to groove with the Kids. They're nothing" (OED Online 2007). The late attestation of this use suggests that this is the most innovative use of *lame*, a meaning that appears to have developed during the twentieth century.

*Lame* dates back to at least the eighth century in English and corresponds with Old Frisian *lam*, which had a Middle High German variant *lieme*, meaning "dull, slack, gentle, early" (OED Online 2007). The OED offers among its early examples, "1388 WYCLIF *2 Sam.* v. 8 A blynde man and *lame* schulen not entre in to the temple." It appears that physical impairment was the first meaning for *lame* in English, attested first in 725 C.E. (OED Online 2007). This meaning appears with both adjectival and nominal *lame*; given the etymology (as well as the relatively higher frequency of adjectival *lame*), the latter presumably came after the former. Other, figurative uses of *lame*, where it has a more abstract meaning but is limited to inanimate referents, are attested since 1374, as in "1390 GOWER *Conf.* II. 218 The gold hath made his wittes *lame*," in a usage the OED defines as "maimed, halting; imperfect or defective, unsatisfactory as wanting a part or parts. Said esp. of an argument, excuse, account, narrative, or the like" (OED Online 2007). Thus, we have two contexts in which *lame* makes no direct reference to physical impairment: first, with inanimates and first attested in the second half of the fourteenth century (at least six centuries after *lame* entered the English language); second, with humans and first attested in the mid-twentieth century. Did being "lame" in the late twentieth century have anything to do with disability? I argue that, at least for younger speakers of the late twentieth century, the answer is an almost definite no. For linguists interested in understanding the semantic history of *lame*, however, the answer is yes.

### Social Background

Many individuals with disabilities and advocates are well aware of the fact that *lame* is, historically (though not functionally), the "same" word when it refers to disability as when it refers to social characteristics and condemn any use of the word as offensive (see Clark & Marsh 2002; Blocksidge 2003:42; Gosling 2003). This suggests that some members of this community believe that complete synchronic disassociation of this form from disability, given its diachronic roots, is impossible.<sup>1</sup> As one disabled multimedia storyteller puts it, "What parent would want to explain jokes or insults



**Figure 1.** Reclaiming *lame* as a positive disability-related term  
 Source: Koyama (2000-2007). Reprinted with permission.

about being ‘lame’ or ‘spazza’ to their disabled child? The oppression and exclusion of disabled people by society is currently enshrined in our language, and this needs to be confronted and changed” (Gosling 2003).<sup>2</sup> Others have advocated “reclamation” of *lame* as a positive term, as illustrated in Figure 1 (Koyama 2000-2007).<sup>3</sup>

While some individuals cite *lame* as a prime example of linguistic violence toward individuals with disabilities, other speakers, even some who are concerned with issues of offensive language, do not appear to be aware of the ostensible historical roots of *lame*. For example, the author of the Web site “What’s Offensive” apparently does not associate *lame* with disability, as shown in his explanation of why it is offensive to say “That’s so gay” in (3).

- (3) Obviously (at least to me), when you say this, you’re equating being gay with being stupid or *lame* or whatever. This is seriously offensive. It’s like saying “that’s so Black” or “that’s so Jewish,” although those may sound sort of silly b/c you’re not used to hearing them. But it’s the same idea. (“What’s Offensive” 2005)

Similarly, the BBC's Board of Governors, defending the derogatory use of *gay* by a media personality, apparently had no awareness of the parallels between this and the use of *lame*, ruling "that the word 'gay' now means 'lame' or 'rubbish' among young people and may be used in a pejorative sense without insulting homosexuals" (Telegraph.co.uk 2006). In response to a reader question regarding the relationship between disability and other contexts in which *lame* occurs, the editor of an online disability-rights magazine states, "I think a little more complaining—or at least discussion—is called for" (Johnson 2006).<sup>4</sup>

I show here that by the end of the twentieth century *lame* had lost its physical disability meaning for most speakers. Focusing on evidence from the twentieth century, I argue that the gradual process of semantic change that *lame* experienced was a process of semantic bleaching (cf. Heine & Reh 1984:15) and pragmatic strengthening (cf. Hopper & Traugott 1993). During the ongoing process of semantic bleaching, from the fourteenth century, the more concrete meanings of *lame* have been gradually extended to more abstract contexts. Simultaneously, through the process of pragmatic strengthening, elements of meaning or inferences that frequently co-occurred in surrounding discourse in more concrete contexts were absorbed into and retained in more innovative, abstract contexts. The result of this process of semantic innovation is a kind of shift through which "one meaning is demoted, another promoted" (Hopper & Traugott 1993:88). Such is the case, as Sweetser (1988:392) notes, for the English *go-future*: "we lose the sense of physical motion (together with all its likely background inferences). We gain, however, a new meaning of future prediction or intention—together with *its* likely background inferences."

This is not to suggest that speakers still associate *lame* with disability somewhere in their unconscious (though this is possible), nor is it meant to suggest some "deep meaning" of *lame* beyond what is found in everyday usage today. As an element changes semantically, older uses may not disappear but rather coexist. This situation can have more than one outcome. First, it may lead to divergence of forms, such that forms become polysemous; this is perhaps the most widely recognized kind of semantic change for lexical items and has certainly occurred with *lame*. Second, since semantic change is gradual, newer meanings retain elements of older meanings, a phenomenon that Bybee and Pagliuca (1987) call "retention" and Hopper (1991) calls "persistence."

I propose that modern *lame*, a polysemous form, has a newer, abstract social meaning that shows retention of certain distributional (and thus semantic) patterns from when it was used primarily to refer to disability. I further suggest that the elements that were retained were those that frequently occurred in disability contexts. Thus, new contexts of use—giving rise to innovative meanings—retain some, but not all, of the elements commonly associated with *lame* in more conservative contexts. While no longer indexing disability, newer *lame* contexts offer a grainy image of the representation of individuals with physical disabilities, or "discourses of disability" (Barton 2001:169), in the first half of the twentieth century. In this way, meanings commonly associated with disability in the early twentieth century have shaped the semantic path *lame* has taken. This argument is not meant to be understood, of course, as saying that disability-related uses of *lame* and other (historically

related) uses are, for speakers, “the same word” or mean “the same thing,” a common misinterpretation of the notion of retention.

## Aims and Scope

This article is an attempt to move forward with Johnson’s request for further discussion of this culturally polemic term. While the use of *lame* can hardly be considered a “Great Language Debate” (cf. Rickford 1999:267), it is certainly a debate that is “closely connected to the exercise of power and to the construction of social difference” (Heller 1999:260). Sociolinguistic and discourse studies informed by disability studies are scarce (see, however, Foucault 1994; Barton 1996, 1999, 2001; Galvin 2003; Ryan, Anas, & Gruneir 2006; Antaki, Walton, & Finlay 2007). Taking a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach (e.g., Fairclough 1989, 1992, 1995; Wodak 1996; van Dijk 1997), this corpus-based study seeks to benefit from both qualitative interpretation and limited quantitative analyses of data (for similar methods, see, e.g., Stubbs 1992, 1996; Krishnamurthy 1996; Galasinski & Marley 1998; Fairclough 2000; Orpin 2005; Mautner 2007; Gabrielatos & Baker 2008). The adoption of such methods in CDA, without losing the valuable qualitative component, may help to alleviate some concerns regarding the academic rigor, accuracy, or generalizability of CDA findings (e.g., Sharrock & Anderson 1981; Widdowson 1995a, 1995b, 1996; Fowler 1996:8; Stubbs 1997; Gabrielatos & Baker 2008). Such empirical evidence contributes to our still-nascent grasp on the links between social structures and linguistic systems.<sup>5</sup>

Taking a semiotics approach, Galvin (2003:156) argues that various “key words,” such as *cripple*, *disabled*, or *handicapped*, have created “stereotypical identities” such that “the signifier, ‘disabled,’ becomes attached to a range of signifiatory concepts (signifieds) such as weak, passive, dependant, unintelligent, worthless and problematic, so that when the word is spoken, a negative . . . feeling is evoked.” I explore these claims in real time through the patterns of one particular word.

After a brief description of the study’s data and method, I present the results. In the first subsection of the results section, I present findings about the general trends in *lame* occurrence, with special attention given to co-occurring descriptors. It is suggested that the semantic change involved represents universal tendencies and that the more abstract, social meanings of *lame* in (1) and (2) (and, indeed, in Labov’s 1973 study) are the crystallized vestiges of the (perceived and real) social associations, meanings, and consequences of the physical impairment *lame* indicates in more concrete contexts. In the second subsection, quantitative diachronic evidence is presented for the shift from more concrete to more abstract contexts. The third subsection qualitatively examines the social implications of some occurrences of *lame* associated with the earliest codified meaning. The fourth subsection provides a qualitative exploration of the second and third steps on the proposed path of semantic change, in more abstract contexts. Particular attention is paid to any remaining vestiges of meaning or semantic prosody that appear to have been retained from the earliest codified meaning. Finally, in the discussion section, I consider the nature of the participation of socially

outstanding words such as *lame* in universal processes of change, suggesting that such items should not necessarily be considered to fall outside more general trends but rather that these trends may be constrained by a construction's role in the production of discourses of power and social difference.

## Method

The data used for this study were extracted from two principal corpora. First, I used Mark Davies's Internet interfaces to extract all examples of *lame* from the 100-million-word British National Corpus (BNC), which includes data in a variety of registers from the 1980s through 1993, yielding 251 tokens. Second, I extracted all occurrences of *lame* from the 100+-million-word *TIME Magazine* corpus (TIME), spanning 1923 to 2006, yielding 648 tokens. These data, entered into Excel, were supplemented by the 1,848, 364-word Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MiCASE), accessed online through a free Web site, which yielded 5 tokens. All quantitative information provided represents the two larger corpora (BNC and TIME) only, since data from MiCASE were not extensive enough to permit generalization. In every case, the year, specific article or interview, and genre (where relevant) were recorded in Excel. In most instances, a shorter concordance context was used, but there were a few dozen cases in which an entire paragraph or document was read to contextualize the occurrence in question.

After the initial extraction of 899 tokens of the lexeme *lame* from BNC and TIME, two important distinctions were made. First, the homograph *lame*, a type of cloth, was excluded. Second, *lame duck* as in (4) and variants were set aside; these accounted for 23 percent (205 of 899) of the data, with 86 percent ( $n = 176$ ) from TIME and 14 percent ( $n = 29$ ) from the BNC.<sup>6</sup> The *lame duck* occurrences were highly frequent and were originally coded along with the rest of the data, yielding results that would complement the present study nicely: *lame duck* has retained some of the semantics associated with *lame* in other contexts, at least in TIME. Unfortunately, these results were so rich that space limitations do not permit me to do them justice here.

(4) The fact: Richard Nixon has become a *lame duck*. (TIME, 12 February 1973)

After these exclusions, I was left with a total of 617 tokens, 66 percent ( $n = 407$ ) from TIME and 34 percent ( $n = 210$ ) from the BNC. While the BNC includes a variety of registers, including spontaneous spoken data, TIME is much narrower in scope. For the synchronic discussion, I have combined the data from both corpora; for the diachronic analysis, I included only data from TIME since the BNC does not offer diachronic data. Despite an apparent shared history in both varieties of English, given the differences in the nature of the corpora, any cross-dialectal inferences we may be tempted to make are hazy at best.

To present a quantitative account of contexts of *lame* occurrence, the data from both corpora were also coded for adjective type. Three adjective types were identified: (1) "the lame," which is a substantive adjective that occurred in a variety of syntactic positions;

(2) predicative adjective, as in “that’s lame”; and (3) attributive adjective, as in “the lame excuse.” Second, I coded for the type of referent described (e.g., man, horse, excuse). Third, to have a more general understanding of referent patterns, these were also examined via referent animacy, based on the three contexts identified in the OED and in the data: (1) with animate referents (humans and other animals) with more concrete meanings, (2) with inanimate referents (e.g., excuses, performances, actions) with more abstract meanings, and finally (3) with human referents with more abstract meanings.

To understand which inferences were frequent enough to crystallize as a new coded meaning for *lame*, it was essential to explore the semantic field of *lame* through a focus on the surrounding discourse. My interest in co-occurring descriptors is based on Leech’s (1974) notion of collocative meaning, that is, “words have a tendency to take on the meanings of their habitual collocates” (Orpin 2005:39); and Sinclair’s (1991) semantic prosody, that is, “the connotative meanings of words can be coloured by the collocates they attract” (Orpin 2005:39). Since “through their collocational and, consequently, prosodic choices, newspapers [and other language users] make and communicate sociopolitical choices” (Gabrielatos & Baker 2008:14), it seems reasonable to seek sociopolitical meaning in patterns found in *lame* collocates. Diachronically, though not every occurrence can be taken as seriously as one may be tempted to take it (Louw 1993), such semantic prosody becomes a new semantics.

To see the larger picture of twentieth-century *lame*, I recorded any description that was linked to the *lame* token either syntactically (e.g., in a list) or referentially (e.g., an adjective describing the same referent) in the twenty-five words that occurred before and twenty-five words that occurred after the occurrence. I cast this net as wide as possible to account for the wide variety of ways in which speakers may express associations. Thus, sometimes the words were joined with a conjunction or occurred serially, as *careless* in (5) and *lanky, cranky*, and *65-year-old* in (6). Other times, these were elaborations on *lame*, as in (7).

- (5) The *lame* and the *careless* are taken down quickly. (TIME, 23 February 1987)
- (6) *Lanky, lame, cranky, 65-year-old* Charles Grey Grey . . . (TIME, 14 April 1941)
- (7) Despite their stylish wardrobe in the film—they’re costumed by the woman who used to dress Madonna—they’re *lame: they don’t have sex* (with each other or, it seems, anyone else). They *work all the time*. They *believe in extraterrestrials*. (TIME, 22 June 1998)

I separated these descriptors into contrastive and noncontrastive based on discourse function (not semantics). About one-fourth of the data—26 percent (104 of 407) of TIME occurrences and 26 percent (54 of 210) of BNC occurrences—had one or more co-occurring noncontrastive descriptors. To differentiate between notions or characteristics commonly associated with *lame*, as in (5) to (7), and those that were contrasted with *lame*, contrasting co-occurring descriptors, as in (8) and (9), were separated out.



- (8) For my life I cannot understand, what is it makes this man now so *lame*, so hesitant, so crippled, who was wont to be *hale* and *prompt* enough. (BNC, HGG)
- (9) Like Letterman, Sajak has a touch of self-mocking irony and presides over irreverent comedy bits, which range from *funny* (Sajak goes to the doctor) to *lame* (audience members are enlisted to play Dunk an Auto Mechanic). (TIME, 23 January 1989)

It is essential that coding for contrastive meaning was not based on my own interpretation of which descriptions might semantically contrast with *lame* but rather on the discourse functions of antonymy outlined by Jones (2002) and further developed in Jones and Murphy (2005). These classifications have been found to be adequate for the analysis of both spoken and written English (Jones 2006:211). For example, in (8), a distinction is being made, exemplifying Distinguished Antonymy: a man who was once *prompt* and *hale* is now something else, namely *lame*, *hesitant*, and *crippled*. In (9), it is not a change, but two extreme points on a continuum, functioning as Extreme Antonymy, with *funny* comedy bits at one polar end and *lame* comedy bits at the opposite. Note, however, that in (10), the descriptor *brilliantly talented*, which is positive and thus contrasts semantically with most descriptions of *lame* referents, was coded here as noncontrastive since the surrounding discourse offers no syntactic or discourse cue that any contrast was meant.<sup>7</sup>

- (10) Blessed with a private income from his parents in Lancaster, Pa., coddled in childhood, *lame*, diabetic, vain, insecure and *brilliantly talented*, Demuth lacked neither admirers nor colleagues. (TIME, 07 December 1987)

The point here is that, in my initial coding, I was not interested in the binary contrast between “positive” and “negative” connotations. As Dilts and Newman (2006) convincingly argue, a method that relies on dividing “good” and “bad” prosody is problematic since its replicability is questionable. In coding, my own evaluation of the “good” or “bad” semantics of descriptors was not taken into account, but rather only the particular discursive role of each descriptor in relation to *lame*, thus avoiding creating a circular argument.<sup>8</sup>

These coding methods, grounded in discourse function, attempted to strike a balance between adherence to strict syntactic formulae and the desire to capture as much nuance as possible. Following a narrow version of the standard method for the examination of semantic prosody, in which “the prosodies are not simply to be equated with the nuances found at any one collocational position or with any one part of speech, but rather they emerge from miscellaneous lexical and phraseological phenomena in the context of usage of the word in question” (Dilts & Newman 2006:233), no strict syntactic guidelines were put into place. All co-occurring descriptors within twenty-five words in either direction of all occurrences of *lame* were coded as either contrastive or noncontrastive. Contrastive descriptors were relatively infrequent and co-occurred with 3 percent (14 of 407) of TIME and 4 percent (9 of 210) of BNC data.<sup>9</sup>

These methods, of course, still left some useful contextual evidence outside the stricter definitions of co-occurring descriptors. This evidence included implications from verb choice, such as the uselessness implied in (11), or in other surrounding discourse, such as the lack of sophistication and homebound nature of life portrayed in (12).

- (11) A ranch on the range *isn't likely to find Much use* for a cowboy who's dead, *lame* or blind, So if you've known Katey, Please listen to this: Only a doctor can cure syphilis! (TIME, 11 April 1949)
- (12) Everywhere, audiences seem to represent *a class which could not be won by smart, theatrical revivalism*. To city theatres, churches, convention halls go elderly, placid people, some blind, some *lame* or halt, *who might not have gone out since the last Chautauqua* or travelog in the church basement. They see "Seth Parker and his Jonesport Neighbors" performed with no "props" save a fireplace, chairs and the melodeon. *Of plot the entertainment has little. . . . The acting is unpretentious, the comedy naive*, such as when Seth gets his foot tangled in a carpet while beating time to music. (TIME, 23 November 1931)

Such information in the surrounding discourse, found in implications at the discourse level and less easily replicable as a measurement, are discussed qualitatively throughout this article.

## Results

### Frequency and Meaning

In usage-based models of language change, from phonology (cf. Bybee 2001) to morpho-syntax (cf. Bybee & Thompson 2000; Bybee & Hopper 2001) to lexicon (cf. Traugott & Dasher 2002), frequency is understood as "a primary contributor" (Bybee 2003:602) to change. Frequency of occurrence also plays a role in the analysis of synchronic use, which captures a construction in transition, with the surrounding context offering a potentially prophetic portrait of what is to come for this particular construction. Just as in some ways "today's morphology is yesterday's syntax" (Givón 1971:413), in some ways, today's semantics is yesterday's discourse. One approach we may take to access the semantic preference of *lame*, or the co-occurrence with "a class of words which share some semantic feature" (Stubbs 2001:88), is by recording all co-occurring descriptors. This allows us to discover which kinds of descriptions are most frequent and which are less frequent, revealing the semantic prosody of *lame*, that is, "the consistent aura of meaning with which a form is imbued by its collocates" (Louw 1993:175; also see Sinclair 1987, 1998; Stubbs 2001; Partington 2004; Mautner 2007). The syntactic and discourse contexts in which *lame* has occurred in twentieth-century TIME will begin to offer a picture of the semantic prosody of this term.

In the twentieth-century corpora examined, *lame* tends to co-occur with several semantic fields.<sup>10</sup> While some examples within these are possibly flattering, such as *whimsical* and *earnest*, the great majority of these descriptors are generally negative.<sup>11</sup> Tables 1 and 2 show the entire list of descriptors that co-occur with *lame* in both corpora. Table 1 lists the concrete semantic fields associated with *lame*, which have been roughly divided into nine categories: age, disability, gender, group membership, health, movement, pain, size or shape, and strength. Table 2 lists the more abstract semantic fields associated with *lame* in the data, divided into five categories: beauty or pleasantness, humor, intelligence and sophistication, personality, and productivity and efficiency. Since these tables are exhaustive lists of the noncontrastive co-occurring descriptors found in both corpora, representing 26 percent of all *lame* occurrences, they permit a rough frequency-based characterization of elements associated with *lame*. We can see, first, which semantic fields are more strongly associated (e.g., personality) and which more weakly (e.g., gender), based on the size of the list for any given field. Furthermore, an examination of the internal content of each field reveals which kinds of meanings are more frequent (e.g., ill), which are less frequent (e.g., brilliant), and which never occurred in these data (e.g., beautiful).

Examples of disability with concrete *lame* are seen in (13) and (14) and of age in (15).

- (13) These oldsters fight back. They are *lame*, *halt*, *blind* and loony, but scrappy enough . . . (TIME, 7 April 1975)
- (14) a mournful procession of the *blind* and *lame*, and of enfeebled, decrepit, *asthmatic*, consumptive wretches . . . (BNC, 209 HR0)
- (15) Josh wondered how much use an *aging* and *lame* night watchman would be in an emergency . . . (BNC, FPM)

Of course, these patterns “are not reflecting natural differences,” but rather “they are weaving a structure of symbol and interpretation around them, and often vastly exaggerating or distorting them” (Connell 1987:80). This distortion becomes palpable in the social characterizations accompanying *lame*. Evoking Western capitalist notions of productivity and efficiency (Barnes 1997), *lame* co-occurs with descriptors of uselessness or inefficiency. Echoing these patterns, in the early twentieth century, a dream interpretation guide explained, “For a woman to dream of seeing any one *lame*, foretells that her pleasures and hopes will be unfruitful and disappointing” (Miller 1901:109). In both corpora, we find the frequent *lame excuse(s)* (4.5 percent,  $n = 28$ ) and *lame attempt(s)* (1.8 percent,  $n = 11$ ), a metaphorical extension and semanticization of this association.

*Lame* is also associated with marginalized social groups, reflecting the relatively low social status afforded the groups shown to be associated with *lame* throughout Western history (Stiker 1999). What matters here is not necessarily the level of writers’ awareness of such associations (in (16) the writer is obviously aware of the link between physical impairment and social marginalization) or even writers’ presumed intentions to oppress or liberate—intentions that can at best be gleaned anachronistically—but in the mere co-occurrence of contexts. By linking *lame* and poverty, either naïvely or conscious of the

**Table 1.** Comprehensive List of More Concrete Noncontrastive Descriptors Co-occurring with *Lame* in TIME and British National Corpus (BNC), by Semantic Field

Descriptor Category	
Age	TIME: <i>65-year-old, aged, elderly, grey, old</i> BNC: <i>a year older, aging, decrepit, elderly, full of wrinkles, old</i>
Disability	TIME: <i>bandy-legged, blind, blind in one eye, cross-eyed, dumb, empty of right sleeve, halt, hunchback, lepers, one-eyed, palsied, (partially/partly/ slightly) deaf, spastic, spavined, victim of cerebral palsy</i> BNC: <i>blind, blind in one eye, crippled, got a big leg, halt, malformed, purblind, stunted, twisted</i>
Gender	TIME: <i>female, femme, mothers rich in children, pregnant women, prissy</i> BNC: <i>pregnant</i>
Group membership	TIME: <i>Athapascan Indian, laborers, mothers rich in children, mulatto, poet-adventurer, poilus, poor, redneck, shepherd</i> BNC: <i>banned, chartered, manacled, marked, marked for life, poor</i>
Health	TIME: <i>dead, incurably ill, infirm, moth-eaten (horse), pale-faced, placid, pregnant women, sick, yellow-skinned</i> BNC: <i>asthmatic, consumptive wretches, ill, pregnant, sick, sickly, wheezy</i>
Movement	TIME: <i>stiff</i> BNC: <i>bedridden, stiff</i>
Pain	TIME: <i>in constant pain, sore</i> BNC: <i>ailing, bruised, sore</i>
Size or shape	TIME: <i>lank, lanky, little, narrow-shouldered, short (5 ft. 2 in.), tiny</i> BNC: <i>fat, thin</i>
Strength	TIME: <i>defenseless, fragile, malnourished, outfought, outgunned, outmanned, weak</i> BNC: <i>enfeebled, exhausted, feeble, heavily-laden, helpless, tired, weary</i>

implications, the association itself is nonetheless reinforced through its repetition. See (17) for an example of *lame* with a female referent, surrounded by descriptors of disability and ugliness.

- (16) It is the limping walk of someone who has been crippled—; the Greek name for it is the “iamb”, which means “*lame* man”—; people who have been *manacled, marked, banned, chartered*. (BNC, CG3)
- (17) Imagine a *woman, lame, a hunchback, cross-eyed* and with *two warts*. (TIME, 15 October 1965)

Moving beyond the physical realm, we find *lame* co-occurring with terms related to (humorless) humor, as in (18). Further evidence of this association is found in TIME, where there were thirteen occurrences of *lame joke(s)* (none in the BNC), making up 3 percent of the TIME data. While all of the humor examples refer to inanimate referents and therefore are not in direct reference to disability, it seems reasonable to suggest that this frequent association was not simply a spontaneous development but rather a reflection of earlier discourse patterns surrounding earlier

**Table 2.** Comprehensive List of More Abstract Noncontrastive Descriptors Co-occurring with *Lame* in TIME and British National Corpus (BNC), by Semantic Field

Descriptor Category	
Beauty, pleasantness	TIME: <i>gross, with two warts</i> BNC: <i>bleary-eyed, excremental, nose like Cyrano, revolting</i>
Humor	TIME: <i>almost no laughs, hard-to-sit-through, <b>light-hearted</b>, slapstick, sippy, stagy</i> BNC: <i>dull, sneer-along</i>
Intelligence, sophistication	TIME: <i>believe in extraterrestrials, <b>brilliantly talented</b>, gnat-brained, inarticulate, obvious, superficial, ungifted</i> BNC: <i>dumb, kitsch, sticky (translations), stupid</i>
Personality	TIME: <i>argumentative, atrabilious, careless, coddled in childhood, cranky, don't have sex, <b>earnest, great</b>, immodest, insecure, lackluster, lazy, loony, mad, no spirit, <b>passionate</b>, sad, strange, tame, unlucky, vain, <b>whimsical</b>, work all the time</i> BNC: <i>alcoholic, forgotten, foul, hesitant, no passion, pathologically shy, sad, suspect</i>
Productivity, efficiency	TIME: <i>deadbeats, disordered, indolent, inefficient, looked finished, nonproductive, pieces of demagogic doo-doo, totally false, trash, unfit for military duty</i> BNC: <i>inaccurate, otiose</i>

(more concrete) uses of *lame*. This notion is consistent with the findings of several scholars who report evidence of a centuries-old association of disability with ridicule and comedy (Biklen & Bogdana 1977; Barnes 1991, 1992a; Clark 2003). *Lame* is also associated with a lack of intelligence, as in (19) and (20).

- (18) Well, because this *sippy* comedy is pretty *lame*, despite the efforts of Steve Martin (TIME, 13 January 1992)
- (19) And if I feel like it, I won't just screw up your life with that *stupid, lame* bitch, I'll make her part of the deal. (BNC, FP7)
- (20) so did most of his earlier movies, and they were *lame, gnat-brained* pieces of demagogic doo-doo! (TIME, 21 April 2003)

*Lame* referents also tend to co-occur with descriptions of unpleasant personalities, social ineptitude, or psychological disturbance, as in (21). While the data themselves are not suggestive of criminality (though see *suspect*), the general nature of the personality characterizations found in the data is congruent with social perceptions in modernity, when "disabling traits were interpreted on an individual level as signs of personal malevolence and criminality" (Snyder & Mitchell 2001:379; also see Shakespeare 1994; Mitchell & Snyder 2000:15).<sup>12</sup>

- (21) Laura, Tom's sister, is slightly *lame* and *pathologically shy*; her only friends are the little glass animals she collects . . . (BNC, AYM)

It is also within the semantic realms of humor, intelligence, and personality that we find the six examples, a bit over 1 percent (6 of 407) of the TIME data, that co-occur with terms that we may understand to have positive social value, as in (22), which are marked in bold in Table 2.

- (22) Miss Cornell's realization of the *passionate lame* girl seems a perfect thing. (TIME, 17 March 1924)

### From Concrete to Abstract

The invited inferencing theory of semantic change (Traugott & Dasher 2002), which is a usage-based approach to semantic change (cf. Kemmer & Barlow 2000), aims to explain how polysemy—and sometimes eventual homonymy—arises out of everyday patterns of language use, noting that any change, “at any level in a grammar,” from  $A > B$  is in fact a change from  $A > A \sim B$ , only sometimes resulting in  $> B$  alone (Traugott & Dasher 2002:11). It is this in-between space,  $A \sim B$ , the “historical stage in which meaning categories that can be attributed to one form also overlap synchronically” (Athanasiadou, Canakis, & Cornillie 2006:43) and “one meaning influences the other as they coexist in time” (Traugott 1989:33), that is of particular interest here. If the assumption of this stage is indispensable to understanding the mechanisms of polysemy, as Athanasiadou, Canakis, and Cornillie (2006:43) suggest, then it is the responsibility of the linguist not only to describe the different meanings attached to a form but also to explain the kinds of historical processes that allowed the most innovative meanings to emerge from older meanings. In other words, if there has been a metaphorical extension (see Sweetser 1988), what is the nature of the path on which change took place? What does meaning A share with meaning B?

Building on previous tentative recognitions of the mechanisms at work in semantic change (Bolinger 1971; Cole 1975:273; Grice 1975/1989), Traugott and Dasher (2002:49, 81) propose that “pragmatic implicatures play a crucial bridging role in semantic change,” noting that “as soon as we think about change in terms of its systematic and ultimately discourse contexts, associations arising out of the context can be construed as playing a major role in change.” New meanings are the semanticized calcifications of frequently occurring discourse contexts. In studies of semantic change emerging through language use, one robust finding has been that meanings become more abstract or figurative over time (Traugott 1989:34-35; Haspelmath 1997; Traugott & Dasher 2002:89, 94-95, 189, and references therein). In the case of metaphorical extension, changes should not be seen as “primarily discontinuous and abrupt . . . , since source and target meanings of metaphors constrain each other experientially” (Traugott & Dasher 2002:77). Instead, some elements of the image-schemata associated with each domain are “preserved across metaphorical mappings” (Sweetser 1990:59). The OED clearly associates the earlier figurative uses with the more concrete meanings of *lame* (“maimed, halting”), but the definition of the later, more innovative uses includes no reference to physical traits. We can hypothesize that *lame* has undergone the following path of semantic change, in which the notions of “concrete” and “abstract” should be understood in relative, not absolute, terms, designating “more concrete” or “more abstract”:

concrete, animate > abstract, inanimate > abstract, human

The difference between the most concrete end at the left and the most abstract end at the right can be seen in (23) and (24), respectively.

- (23) He was bandy-legged and *lame* of one foot; his shoulders were crooked and contracted (TIME, 3 March 1923)
- (24) Gavin fumbles, pointing to his head and chest, “and here.” She giggles: “That was really *lame*, Dad.” The scene is moving—Gavin so badly wants to make her, and himself, believe—yet hilarious. (TIME, 5 June 2006)

If this proposed path is correct, then not only should we see frequent semantic and discursive elements that are shared across each of these contexts, as we witnessed to some extent in the co-occurring descriptors discussed in the previous section, but also we should see (1) cognitive or social associations between different coded meanings, as a reflection of the ongoing process of semantic change, and (2) a shift in the default context of use, from more concrete to more abstract, as the more innovative meanings gain currency.

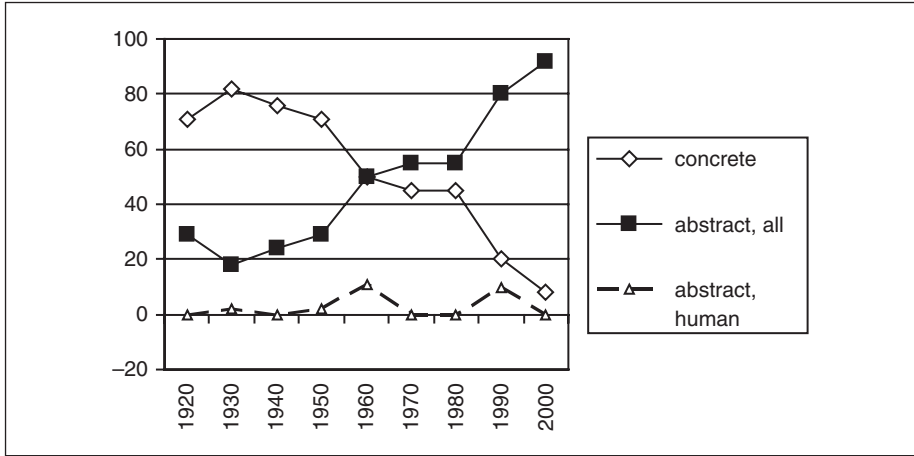
Following the proposed path, there should be a decline in concrete uses of *lame* in reference to body parts (25), animals (26), and humans (27).

- (25) One Deputy, slowed by a *lame* leg, was hit in the chest by a tear-gas bomb (TIME, 1 June 1962)
- (26) But his next time up he willed some *lame* line-drive single to jump over the wall. (TIME, 21 September 1998)
- (27) Although New York’s *lame* Governor Franklin Delano Roosevelt is today the leading Democratic candidate . . . (TIME, 23 November 1931)

At the same time, there should be an increase in more abstract uses of *lame* to refer to inanimate objects, as in (28), with abstract uses of *lame* with human referents (29) coming in after the other two and gaining in frequency.

- (28) Alas, most of these films have been *lame* and prissy. (TIME, 28 March 1988)
- (29) Anyone who does not know that is obviously *lame*, a noidor perhaps just over 25 . . . (TIME, 2 June 1967)

Figure 2 shows the proportion of unambiguous *lame* occurrences in concrete and abstract contexts by decade as well as the relative frequency of abstract contexts with human referents (the most innovative use) within these unambiguous contexts. There has been a general decline in the proportion of concrete contexts, from 71 percent in the 1920s to 8 percent in the 2000s; the use of *lame* in abstract contexts has risen from 29 percent of all unambiguous occurrences in the 1920s to 92 percent in the 2000s. The use of *lame* in concrete and abstract contexts is equally likely in the 1960s, with concrete contexts predominating before that decade and abstract contexts after.



**Figure 2.** Relative frequencies of concrete and abstract contexts with *lame* in TIME

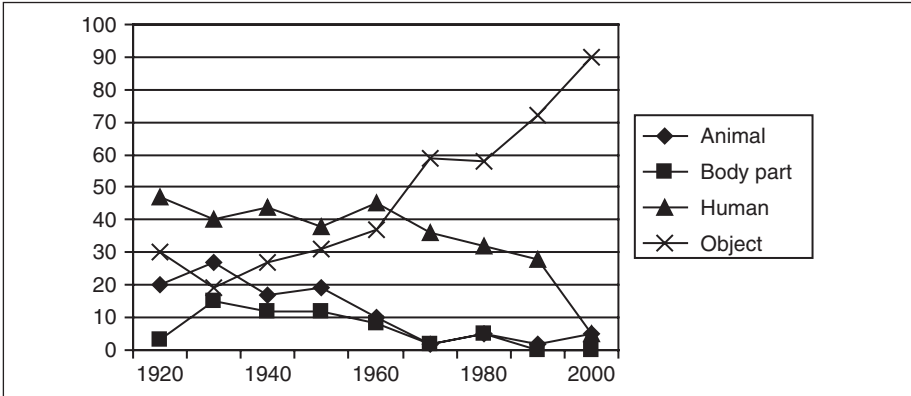
Human referents in abstract contexts occur only once in the 1930s and once in the 1950s (representing 2 percent of the data in each decade); they become slightly more frequent, at 11 percent and 10 percent in the 1960s and 1990s, respectively.

This evidence suggests that, while abstract uses of *lame* are indeed attested since the 1300s, the default (i.e., most frequent) meaning of *lame* in written Standard American English, as represented in TIME, was concrete through the first half of the twentieth century, when abstract contexts became more frequent and when abstract uses with human referents are first attested.

Along with the semantic shift from more concrete to more abstract meanings for *lame*, there occurs a shift in referent category. As Figure 3 reveals, the relative proportion of inanimate referents with *lame* has risen steadily since the 1930s and the proportion of human referents stayed relatively stable until the 1960s, when we see a decline in the 1970s through the 1990s. While body parts and animals are consistently present (and slowly declining in frequency) as *lame* referents, neither comes close to the frequency of human referents until the last decade. This makes them an unlikely source for newer codified meanings of *lame* since frequency plays a leading role in change. As shown in Figure 2, most of these human referents occur in concrete contexts, that is, they refer to physical impairment or disability. It is between the 1990s and the 2000s that the use of *lame* with human referents takes a deep dive, suggesting that this context—the most likely for *lame* during the first half of the twentieth century—may fall into disuse.

As mentioned in the introduction, these two moments of decline (the 1960s and 1970s, and the 1990s) are two decisive moments in Western disability history. The first decline is found in the midst of the civil rights movement, which spurred changes in the status of disabled people in society (Crowther 2007). In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act, the first civil rights law in the United States protecting disability, was signed into law in the United States, followed by legislation such as the Disability





**Figure 3.** Relative frequencies of referent class with *lame* in TIME by decade

Discrimination Act in the United Kingdom in 1995. These movements brought about a surge of new terms to refer to (physical) disability, such as *handicapped*, *disabled*, *differently-abled*, and *physically challenged*, presumably taking over the semantic territory of *crippled* and *lame* and perhaps allowing the semantics of the latter more freedom to undergo semantic change. It is likely that TIME changed its editorial norms regarding *lame* under the influence of these social changes. While this process of lexical competition is beyond the scope of the current study, it would be worthwhile to undertake an empirical, context-sensitive investigation of this process. The results shown in Figure 3 suggest that, while usage and representation do affect ideology, changes in ideology (and conscious linguistic shift) can effect changes in representation as well, apparently rather quickly.

There is, of course, an alternate and equally valid interpretation, not incompatible with the first: the older, pejorative meanings of *lame* as impairment simply shifted onto the newer terms on a kind of “euphemism treadmill” (Pinker 2007:320). In the case of *lame*, then, as the public and the media became conscious of the negative associations of concrete *lame*, this use was abandoned in favor of new terms that had not (yet) acquired such undesirable connotations and were therefore considered less offensive, such as *handicapped*, abandoned by many in the 1980s for *disabled* or, influenced by the “people first” movement, *people with disabilities*. Some hyper-euphemized terms, replacing these in some public discourses, such as *differently-abled* and *alter-abled*, never enjoyed widespread acceptance among disability communities or among the general public (*Oxford Dictionary of English Online* 2005). In 1985, The *Los Angeles Times* reported, “In a valiant effort to find a kinder term than handicapped, the Democratic National Committee has coined differently abled. The committee itself shows signs of being differently abled in the use of English” (Smith 1985, quoted in Martin 1996-2009). Another term, *physically challenged*, was both limited in scope and quickly parodied, as in *vertically challenged* for “short,” and it quickly fell out of common use (*American Heritage Book of English Usage* 1996:194). In response to these hyper-euphemized terms, many individuals with disabilities asked, “Why do you consider my condition so horrible that it should not be mentioned?” Across the United States, some members of the disability community began to use the

word *crip*, a transformative reclamation of *cripple*, as a disability-positive term that inverted the hierarchy of assumptions behind the hyper-euphemized terms that had sprung up (see Mitchell & Snyder 1995; McRuer 2006).

### *Social Realm of Concrete Lamé*

In search of the source concepts for the more innovative uses of *lamé*, I would like to take a deeper look at some of the social settings, social groups, and emotions that have been associated with concrete contexts of *lamé*. These associations should form the foundation of more abstract meanings of *lamé*. The sociospatial placement of *lamé* referents in concrete contexts reveals two social spaces outside the home recurrently associated with *lamé*: Christianity and mendicancy. As exemplified in (30), one writer considers the church the only viable option for those born disabled in the early twentieth century.

- (30) But Miguel was born *lamé*, so *his only future was the Church*. (TIME, 9 August 1934)

This association of the *lamé* with (Christian) spirituality, often connected to the idea of a cure, continues through the middle of the century, shown in (31) and (32), as well as into the late twentieth century, shown in (33).

- (31) Like *lamé* pilgrims *flocking to a shrine*, the needy of Francavilla Fontana and surrounding villages scribbled the sad facts of their needs in letters . . . (TIME, 26 March 1951)
- (32) Gian Carlo Menotti's opera about the *lamé* shepherd boy who *pledges his crutch to the infant Jesus* has been a yearly joy since 1951 and may well be one in 2051 . . . (TIME, 15 December 1958)
- (33) David Threlfall was recognizably a victim of cerebral palsy, *lamé* and inarticulate, whose *great soul* struggled to overcome his infirmities. (TIME, 14 February 1986)

In Europe, the ideological association of disability and the Divine goes back at least as far as the Middle Ages (Stiker 1999:67-68, 82). The ideological link among disability, poverty, and spirituality in the West has been noted by numerous disability scholars (e.g., Bragg 1997; Snyder & Mitchell 2001:379), though the association was sometimes with malevolent spirits or sin (Huet 1998:21). While most associations of disability and spirituality served to encourage "good deeds" toward the disabled, including social service and charity programs, they also marginalized people with disabilities because they placed them outside the realm of everyday interaction. This means that these "special," "inspirational" beings, while immune to much of the criticism wielded at "ordinary" human beings, are also seen as inappropriate for social domains such as true friendship (which requires reciprocity among perceived equals) or sexual activity (which is often considered perverse among perceived unequals). As Haller (2000) notes,

The power of the Supercrip [person with a disability who “overcomes”] is a false power. People with disabilities are put on pedestals because of their inspirational quality in doing ordinary things, which is actually a patronizing way to laud people, imbued with charity. Presenting someone as inspirational is just another way of pitying them for the “tragedy of their fate.”

If the *lame* were not portrayed as being involved in religious activity, they were likely to be portrayed as impoverished (34), sometimes as beggars or charity recipients, as in (35).

- (34) A primary move has been to rid Bogot's streets of *beggars*, which last week were *strangely free of the lame* and the haltresult of a preconference roundup of 300. (TIME, 21 April 1947)
- (35) Years ago people thought only *deadbeats* and the *lame* ended up in outplacement. (TIME, 16 February 1987)

In (34), the writer takes for granted that the reader will understand that “the lame” are beggars, highlighting the frequency of this association. In (35), the writer does not explain why “the lame” are listed along with “deadbeats”; it appears to be obvious that “the lame” are not employed. As Barnes (1992b:6) notes, “The principal cause of the disadvantage experienced by disabled people is not impairment, but restrictive environments and disabling barriers,” such that “‘disability’ represents a complex system of social constraints imposed upon people with impairments by a highly discriminatory society.” The association of unemployment with disability in this way has served as a major roadblock to employment and economic independence for people with disabilities during the twentieth century, reflected in widespread institutionalization as well as in the income-based state programs in many states today, which deny financial assistance to individuals earning much over a poverty income (e.g., Lang 2005). If a person with a significant physical disability does indeed take advantage of the purported “equal opportunities” available in education and the workforce, attaining a middle-class income, in many places this person ceases to qualify for assistance with the tens of thousands of dollars of care and equipment needed to work. She or he will also be hard pressed to find a long-term care insurance company that will cover the preexisting condition, and most health insurance companies do not cover long-term care. Since the average income of any given individual is not enough to cover such care along with regular household expenses, many individuals who require in-home assistance are in fact unable to survive unless they stay out of the workforce. The notion of the “deadbeat” “lame” has thus been solidified into policy. At the same time, these long-held societal beliefs may make employers less likely to trust that employees with disabilities can contribute equally in the workforce. During the middle and late twentieth century, a time of social change regarding disability, the repetition of these associations in the mass media functions to reinforce and reproduce these patterns.

The underlying social attitudes regarding disability in the United States can also be seen when some *lame* individuals are also identified as belonging to or with other marginalized social categories. In the 1930s, there is a “yellow-skinned Portuguese” man, in (36). In the 1950s, there is a “mulatto” and a “Negro,” shown in (37) and (38). The 1960s provide an example of the *lame* associated with “the female” in (39). In the 1970s, an “Indian” man is described as *lame* in (40). In the 1990s, we find a *lame* “redneck” (41) and see homosexuality explicitly compared to *lameness* (42) (which, in turn, is associated once again with religion). In (42), while the writer appears to find the association between “homosexuals” and “the lame” absurd, this rhetoric exposes—and argues against—a more general societal perception of both physical disability and homosexuality as ways of being that need to be cured; moreover, the writer’s apparent wish to dissociate the nature of homosexuality from the nature of physical disability through absurd comparison in fact reinforces disability discourses that construct the undesirability of disability.

- (36) Author Ford melodramatizes the tiny, *lame, yellow-skinned Portuguese* explorer as a cold-blooded sadist . . . (TIME, 15 November 1937)
- (37) Ti-Coyo owes this world few debts: his *mulatto* father is a *lame* hunchback, his Hindu-Chinese mother “a female monster with a squint.” (TIME, 3 September 1951)
- (38) We saw a *lame Negro* bootblack from Herndon’s shop pathetically trying to outrun a mob of whites. (TIME, 4 April 1955)<sup>13</sup>
- (39) Pusey complained that first-year classes this fall would contain only “the *lame*, the halt, the blind and the *female*.” (TIME, 6 September 1968)
- (40) most of the smart money favored George Attla, a *lame*, one-eyed Athapascan *Indian* from Fairbanks, Alaska. (TIME, 10 February 1975)
- (41) Her husband Boomer, a *lame, redneck* welder, appears to represent the lame god Vulcan (TIME, 7 August 1990)
- (42) Reading their stories is like watching a spin-off of the Oral Roberts show in which a skeptic finds Christ, shouts that he is healed and throws away his homosexual crutches. Maybe the *lame* walk and *homosexuals* become heterosexuals, but I doubt it. (TIME, 27 February 1998)

The data here are only suggestive; the frequency of such contexts is simply too low, and the sample too small, to make any steadfast conclusion. Furthermore, while in some cases *lame* occurs alongside a group identifier (e.g., *redneck*) in reference to the same subject (41), other times *lame* refers to one referent and is simply juxtaposed with a group identifier (e.g., *female*) with an entirely different referent (39). Arguably, the former scenario may contribute more directly to *lame*’s semantic prosody than the latter. Whatever the case may be, this list is nonetheless curiously familiar, seeming to be a chronology of those social groups that it has been, at these particular moments, socially acceptable to disparage among certain (privileged) sectors of society (cf. Mitchell & Snyder 2003). As Snyder and Mitchell (2001:369) note, “Like feminized, raced, and

queer bodies, the disabled body became situated in definitive contrast to the articulation of what amounted to a hegemonic aesthetic premised on biology. Within this cultural belief system, the ‘normal’ body provided the baseline for determinations of desirability and human value.” In other words, since the disabled have long been—and continue to be—“okay” to disparage, “lameness” has served as a widely understood backdrop of disdain on which other social groups may be easily devalued (Reid & Knight 2006), a cultural shortcut to symbolic worthlessness, the perfect Other (Baynton 1996; Kudlick 2003; on the concept of the Other, see, e.g., de Beauvoir 1976; Hall 2001). In terms of semantic prosody, then, we can postulate how *lame* could have developed its more abstract meanings of low social status and social undesirability found in its more innovative uses today. Today, abstractly *lame* individuals are social outcasts, involved in uncultured and naïve activities and keeping the company of undesirables, much like the concretely *lame* of the early twentieth century.

Beside association with disfavored social categories, concrete *lame* is also found to be associated with certain emotions affecting those who observe or interact with *lame* referents. Common cultural stereotypes of individuals with disabilities include these individuals as pitiable and pathetic, as especially endearing, as ill or suffering, and as brave or courageous (Barnes 1994:37). Within the framework of disability studies, it has been noted that the emotions of the one who gazes on a disabled subject can constitute a burden for those who are gazed on, either through active and vigilant management of the gazer’s emotions and behavior (Cahill & Eggleston 1994) or through withdrawal from the gaze: “It is not only physical limitations that restrict us to our homes and those whom we know. It is the knowledge that each entry into the public world will be dominated by stares, by condescension, by pity and by hostility” (Morris 1991:25). Some of the emotions evoked within the surrounding discourse of concrete *lame*, thus constituting part of the term’s semantic prosody, include pity (43), sympathy (44), disgust (45), mercy (46), forgiveness (47), and tenderness (48).

- (43) She has led a *pitiful* procession of the mentally *lame*, the halt and the spastic to the colony’s canteen (TIME, 3 March 1952)
- (44) David Threlfall was recognizably a *victim* of cerebral palsy, *lame* and inarticulate, whose great soul struggled to overcome his infirmities. His successor, John Lynch, skitters and jibbers in an otherworldly fashion that never resembles any *sympathy-evoking affliction*. (TIME, 14 February 1986)
- (45) The 22-ft. sailboat (worth \$10,000 new) had been damaged during shipment to Montreal and had served Britannia poorly. Said *disgusted* Skipper Warren: “She was *lame*: kindness called for us to put her down.” (TIME, 9 August 1976)
- (46) They *mercilessly* thin out the old, the weak and the *lame*, while encouraging the newborn to join their endless trek (TIME, 29 April 1974)
- (47) bush, notes Morrow, is an “*unforgiving* place. The *lame* and the careless are taken down quickly. (TIME, 23 February 1987)
- (48) What is more *poignant* than a bird with a *lame* wing—who was once Rookie of the Year? (TIME, 29 March 1982)

The use of *lame* in concrete contexts, then, commonly co-occurs with certain semantic fields, including weakness, small size, uselessness, inefficiency, femininity, and undesirable personality traits. This use is also commonly found associated with human emotions involving pity or pathos. The next section demonstrates how most of these associations continue to co-occur with *lame* even in contexts in which *lame* no longer indexes disability.

### Abstract Contexts

While the examples above show certain associations with *lame* in more concrete contexts, this does not necessarily mean that, during the process of metaphorical extension, all of these associations have carried over into the abstract realm. While the use of *lame* in abstract contexts with inanimate referents is quite old (since at least the mid-fourteenth century, according to the OED), speakers have at times made an explicit link between its use in more concrete animate contexts (e.g., human disability) and more abstract inanimate contexts. Since, as captured in Figure 3, animals and body parts have been only minor players, at least in the twentieth century, it is the human concrete and inanimate abstract contexts that are of principal interest here. Examples (49) to (52), ranging from 1940 to 1990, show that more abstract uses of *lame* and more concrete uses referring to physical disability have sometimes been explicitly linked even in the twentieth century, nearly six hundred years after the earliest documented abstract uses of *lame*. The textual persistence of direct links between concrete and abstract contexts for *lame*, shown in (49) to (52), suggests that we may find reverberations of the semantic prosody of *lame* in more concrete contexts in even the most innovative abstract contexts of use found today.

- (49) The Weak Link (by Allen Wood: produced by Chester Erskin in association with Philip Adler) is a *farce-melodrama* as lighthearted as *Tiny Tim*, and as *lame*. (TIME, 18 March 1940)
- (50) The accident obliged him to cancel all engagements “involving standing or walking.” But he was still able to talk, and for many weeks he had promised a most important announcement in his official capacity—Viceroy of India. Last week the *lame* Lord Linlithgow made his statement. It turned out to be *lame*, too. (TIME, 19 August 1940)
- (51) When he does, though, the movie *wobbles* and goes *lame*. (TIME, 11 June 1973)
- (52) The country’s growing alienation from the rest of the communist world threatens an end to the aid and favorable trade arrangements that have kept its *lame* economy *hobbling* along. (TIME, 5 March 1990)

In fact, in abstract realms, no longer referring to any physical condition, the general characteristics found within *lame*’s semantic preference and semantic prosody remain strikingly similar. *Lame* is still associated with weakness and small size, as in (53) to (55).

- (53) Yet the play, closing on a *lame*, stagy note, *lacks stature*. (TIME, 4 April 1955)
- (54) The aimless script is even more anesthetized. Its *lame* jokes are articulated by *stunted* heroes and vapid chicks (TIME, 2 November 1970)
- (55) Although the show's political anthems and music-hall satires throb with emotion, its love ballads are mostly *lame*—a *weakness* that has been heightened by Joe Masteroff's miscalculated rewrite of his own book. (TIME, 2 November 1987)

It is also still associated with uselessness and inefficiency, as in (56), and with femininity, as in (57).

- (56) This cop thriller bears a surface similarity to the early Eddie hits 48 HRS. and Beverly Hills Cop, but it's *lame* and *lazy*, *inefficient* even as the sort of action machine Hollywood can tool up in its sleep. (TIME, 27 January 1997)
- (57) Alas, most of these films have been *lame* and *prissy*. (TIME, 28 March 1988)

Example (58) indicates that while *lame* audiences may lack sophistication and be entertained by the most naïve of plots (see (12)), *lame* texts are equally lacking depth and sophistication.

- (58) As entertainment[—]Trotsky, Paulette Goddard and *canard faisande*[—]it is superb. As a serious study on a very good painter who is never as great as you estimate him, it is *lame*, *superficial*, *obvious*, and in some aspects, totally false. Rivera is, at his best, a pocket-size Homer, at his worst a billboard-calendarist wooing the tourist trade. (TIME, 25 April 1949)

It is no wonder, then, that in (59) and (60) we find *lame* associated with social ineptitude and naïveté.

- (59) The intelligent reader, that *lame* dog who often *feels the need for help over styles*, will find many familiar Lowell mannerisms. (TIME, 6 June 1969)
- (60) Just look at Scully (Gillian Anderson) and Mulder (David Duchovny). Despite their stylish wardrobe in the film—they're costumed by the woman who used to dress Madonna—they're *lame*: they *don't have sex* (with each other or, it seems, anyone else). They *work all the time*. They *believe in extraterrestrials*. (TIME, 22 June 1998)

As in the concrete realm, abstract *lameness* is associated with the particular emotional reactions, including mockery in (61) and (62), despair and humiliation in (63), disgust in (64), and outrage in (65).

- (61) just so I can *make fun* of how *lame* poetry is and force him to wear a hat with bells (TIME, 31 May 1999)

- (62) The Prime Minister *grinned* at this *lame* bravado. Mr. King was entitled to a little self-satisfaction. (TIME, 23 April 1945)
- (63) No one so far has paid any attention to Judge Davis, who is lamentably *lame* in one regard. He turned to the fourth ancient, Judge J. Warren Davis, 71, not retiring. I refer to his robe, which for years has been the *despair* and *humiliation* of every (TIME, 13 June 1938)
- (64) a Lenin Library lecture walked out in *disgust* at the speaker's *lame* explanations of events in Hungary. (TIME, 7 January 1957)
- (65) The Massachusetts Senator's *lame* joke at the troops' expense drew *outrage* from both (TIME, 20 November 2006)

As the physical, concrete meanings of *lame* are lost through increased frequency in an ever more generalized context, *lame* comes to be a general insult. This generalized, abstract use of *lame* can be seen in (66) to (68).

- (66) the *unlucky*, the *ungifted*, the *indolent* or the otherwise *lame*. (TIME, 31 October 1969)
- (67) Tame Wycherley is *lame* Wycherley—which is precisely *what is wrong* at Lincoln Center. (TIME, 17 December 1965)
- (68) Miss a trick, and another skater will say, with offhand *censure*, “That was totally *lame*.” (TIME, 6 June 1988)

## Discussion

The analysis put forth in this article notes various associations between specific linguistic occurrences, general patterns measured quantitatively, and what is known of the history and representation of members of a social category (people with disabilities) in Western societies. The philosophical concerns evoked by the desire to empirically describe language usage that demonstrates both a continuity of semantics and ideological discourse, on one hand, and the complex results of the interaction of two dynamic, living, connected systems (language use, specifically the semantics of *lame*, and culture, specifically the discourses surrounding disability), on the other, are complex. Studying discourse in corpora when both the semantics of linguistic phenomena and the social significance of what is designated by those phenomena are undergoing change is an intricate task (cf. Ihaleinen 2006). Not only have the semantics of the word *lame* shifted over time, but so have the meanings of disability and the social role(s) of individuals in society who are identified/identify themselves with disability. While we could make a facile claim that use of *lame* is either oppressive or it is not, shifting and contested linguistic and sociocultural practices do not permit such a simplistic analysis. Since “discourse must not be referred to the distant presence of the origin, but treated as and when it occurs” (Foucault 1972:25), those who defend the use of *lame* in nondisability contexts as benign or who simply see no association may indeed have a point.

At the same time, however, no utterance occurs in a sociopolitical or sociohistorical vacuum (Pike 1967:26). Thus, the sociolinguist's preoccupation with patterns, or relations,



a preoccupation that is of course equally relevant in the study of the closely tied act of representation in discourse, becomes paramount. We know that “connotations are not merely subjective associations that lexical items trigger” (Mautner 2007:54) but that these “are also widely shared within a speech community” (Stubbs 2001:35). The complex set of relations between separate acts of (linguistic) representation, on one hand, and each act’s integrity as a single event within systems in flux, on the other, models the tension between continuity and change, between reproduction of patterns and innovation, between the status quo and resistance, and between society and individual.

The diachronic evidence of use of *lame* in abstract contexts is politically ambivalent: it is evidence both of a long and complex legacy of inequality and exclusion and of the real and tangible progress made in the status of individuals associated with disability in the last half of the twentieth century. Critical diachronic discourse analysis that takes into account the existence not only of certain meanings or semantic prosodies but also of the relative frequencies of different kinds of discourse or discourse contexts around a central theme (e.g., disability) or recurrent structure (e.g., *lame*) offers a window into the role of the political and the social in universal processes of language change (on such processes, see, e.g., Bybee & Hopper 2001; Traugott & Dasher 2002). For instance, in the case of *lame*, I have suggested that the physical reality and social positioning of disabled bodies in the West has mitigated, or limited, the paths of subjectification open to *lame*, which, in innovative (abstract) uses, expresses both the speaker’s internal evaluation of the referent and the remnants of culturewide discourses of inequality and power. In this case, *lame* did not follow the contextual generalization of referent type one might expect, from animate referents to all referents, similar, for example, to the Spanish and French *go*-futures, which generalized from a restriction to animate subjects to the co-occurrence with all animacy types (Poplack & Turpin 1999; Aaron 2006). Instead, in these data and in evidence from the OED, speakers and writers avoided abstract uses of *lame* with human referents for centuries after *lame* had generalized from more concrete to more abstract contexts, creating a kind of “gap” in the prototypical path of change. There is no known *linguistic* reason that human referents would not be included in the semantic change that took us from a “(physically) lame girl” or a “lame leg” to a “lame excuse” hundreds of years ago. The reason, then, for an avoidance of human referents is presumably *social*: it points, perhaps, to the particularly strong social stigma attached to human referents of the concrete meaning of physical impairment (Goffman 1986), people with disabilities. In this way, social meanings and their participation in discourses of power, in the case of *lame*, have mitigated and constrained, but not sidestepped, universal tendencies of semantic change.

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## Notes

1. It has been suggested that one might consider this a type of amelioration. In this case, however, I do not believe that this semantic shift can be considered amelioration. In the beginning of its journey in English, *lame* referred to a physical trait, presumably socially neutral. To consider it amelioration would be to ascribe (negative) meaning to earlier uses of *lame* that is not always evident. If anything, this is in fact a pejoration, from neutral (with probable negative connotations) to negative (i.e., a negative denotation). Within the invited inferring model of semantic change employed here, however, which focuses on the path of change and not its end points, such characterizations are of marginal interest.
2. According to the online Urban Dictionary (2007), *spazza* is “a substitute word for blunder.” Also listed is the related *spaztic*, obviously derived from *spastic*, which one user defines as “the full word from spaz” and “fully retarded and acts like a prick and and [*sic*] a [*sic*] offensive way to call someone who has very serious disorders with their body.”
3. I include these examples as illustrations of popular discourse only. I am not suggesting that such removal or reclamation is necessary, ideal, or even possible. The question of semantic entitlement, while important, is beyond the scope of this study.
4. Certainly, the use of *gay* in such contexts also merits attention. This use, however, is not included in the present discussion.
5. While the combination of social factors and functionalist-cognitive models of regular patterns in diachrony is relatively new, it is not without precedent. For example, Enfield’s (2002) *Ethnosyntax* has similar aims. Also, Dasher (1995) studied the development of the acquisition of socially deictic meaning in nonhonorific constructions and lexemes in Japanese, which conventionalized frequently occurring speaker or writer attitudes and assessments; and Aaron (2004) examined how culturally defined gender roles shaped the semantic development of Spanish *salirse*, “go out.”
6. Also excluded from the general study of *lame* were two examples in which *lame* was used anaphorically to further characterize a previously mentioned *lame duck*.
7. While placing any two items in a list does indicate to some extent that they are not considered to be exactly equivalent (e.g., *I like turquoise, sea-foam, and teal* is acceptable to me as a list, but *She slept, snoozed, and slumbered*, whose components are (near) synonyms, sounds more like poetic repetition than a list), only certain discourse contexts imply antonymy or more intense contrastivity (e.g., *The carpet swatches ranged from turquoise to sea-foam, or What once was teal is now sea-foam from too much sunlight*).
8. A method that had instead, for example, relied on my own judgment of whether a descriptor was “negative” or “positive” would have been circular: I might have identified all “positive” descriptors as “contrastive,” thus “proving” a high rate of occurrence of “negative” meanings not contrasting with *lame*.
9. Due to space limitations, contrasting descriptors are not discussed here. These included, in TIME, *could gesticulate, far from winded, funny, game, less inaccurate, lively, newborn, quick, sad, scrappy, sincere, stylish, swift, willing*; and, in the British National Corpus, *able, gay, good, hale, kind heart, lavish, needed for work on the farm, prompt, sound*.
10. Such categorization, especially among categories that tend to overlap and shift with social perceptions, is not clear-cut. I have categorized descriptors according to my own

perceptions, and undoubtedly there will be points of disagreement about how I have chosen to divide these descriptors. Nonetheless, a rough and transparent categorization is better than none; I have provided an exhaustive list of descriptors in the text for those who should like to recategorize according to their own perceptions.

11. Such judgments, of course, vary over time and culture. For instance, in youth-oriented cultures, it is difficult to bring to mind positively valued terms related to older ages; see Mautner (2007) for a corpus-driven semantic study of *elderly*.
12. A recent affirmation of the persistence of these associations (at least in some communities) occurred in 2008, when the instructions for volunteers at the Beijing Olympics and Paralympics explained that “some physically disabled are isolated, unsocial and introspective; they usually do not volunteer to contact people. They can be stubborn and controlling; they may be sensitive and struggle with trust issues. Sometimes they are overly protective of themselves, especially when they are called ‘crippled’ or ‘paralyzed’” (CNN 2008). This language was later removed, following objections.
13. Note also the similarity to a remark about Germans printed during World War II: “With agony-column ads such as these, *hungry Germans* are *pathetically trying* to wangle at least one good meal during the Christmas holidays” (TIME, 18 December 1939). In both cases, the subjects’ struggle to fulfill basic survival needs is seen as “pathetic.” Such characterizations of disabled lives as pathetic or not worth living echo current characterizations of disability, such as a Yahoo! Groups discussion on which user bobandcarole states, “Anonymous pedophile ‘4s00th’ is a *pathetic cripple* that most likely lives alone, fondling itself while dreaming about sodomizing innocent children” (Bobandcarole 2007), and perhaps the debates on “active euthanasia” of disabled newborns (Elliott 2006; Templeton 2006) as well.

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## Bio

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