



## Speaking of women

Men are becoming less sexist. That's according to a study of 2.5 million words from the British National Corpus.

The study found that terms like sexy and blonde have all but vanished from our vocabulary when women are referred to. Other demeaning terms such as daft and stupid have also seen a sharp decline over the past 20 years, as has the association between females and the word naked.

The latest study analysed words of conversation and compared these to similar studies from the 1990s. The research demonstrates a distinct shift in social attitudes towards women over the last 20 years.

The 1990s was a decade in which women became increasingly accepted as equal with men in the workplace and society (in reality as opposed to in law). However, it also saw the rise of 'lad culture', including 'lads mags', and as embodied by TV sitcoms such as Men Behaving Badly.

Tony McEnery, joint head of the study, said the research showed 'negative descriptions of women have fallen away since the early 1990s'.

He told the Sunday Times: 'Women are being described more in their own right and less in terms of their appearance.'

'Now we only rarely hear a woman being described in terms of her hair — blonde, brunette, redhead and so on — and there are fewer negative descriptions such as 'devil', 'strange', 'daft', 'conceited' and 'damned'.

'New ways of describing women appeared in the study, including "international", "gypsy" and "Italian".'

He also said that as less feminine views of women have become more popular, new terms that refer to feminine traits have gained popularity.

He added: 'In the past, women who had long hair, wore skirts and had manicured fingernails did not need to

be given a special description because even if some were not that way, they were expected to be that way. 'Because the word "girls" no longer means what it used to mean, people are reaching for the old archetype — and they are the "girly girls".'

The most popular words to describe women, 'old', 'young' and 'other', have not changed since the 1990s. The words 'big' and 'stupid' have gone from the fourth and sixth most popular words associated with women to joint 10th.

Men are now more commonly referred to in relation to their jobs, according to the study, with an increase in terms 'working', 'rich' and 'business'.

The British National Corpus is a 100 million word collection of samples from written and spoken language gathered from a variety of sources, designed to represent a wide cross-section of British English. As it incorporates unscripted conversations of volunteers, McEnergy believes that the study of the collection was particularly insightful into the psyche of the nation as people struggle to hide their true thoughts when speaking.

'We will never be able to mind-read people and see to what extent they are self-monitoring, but spoken language is as spontaneous as it gets,' he said.

'Because of the demands of language on the brain, people can't keep it up for long if they try to disguise their true thoughts.'

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