It's a queer old way that 'gay' went from light-hearted to so not cool

Laurie Bauer

WHEN they sing about "a lady gay" it does not mean the lady concerned was a lesbian. In fact, it's not entirely clear what it does mean, but it is clear that it is a nice thing to say about a lady.

The word "gay" has a very chequered history. It once meant "colourful"; it also (and at about the same period) meant "light-hearted, carefree and cheerful", perhaps because these qualities go with people who dress colourfully (but perhaps not).

For a while, when used of a horse, it meant the horse was prancing. If used of a dog, it meant the dog's tail was erect. But the phrase "gay dog" used of a man was more about his devil-may-care attitude than anything else. Poetry was once called "the gay science", though that would sound rather odd these days.

Later it became less complimentary. Being carefree was equated with being hedonistic and lacking in care. If you were careless, you were dissolute. And the word "gay" came to be associated in particular with prostitutes. In 1890 one British newspaper had a report about "gay ladies on the beat".

Just when "gay" started to be used of homosexuals and homosexual activity is not clear. Many uses that we can find in print are, in retrospect, ambiguous.

Even when Noel Coward writes about "being the reason why the 'nineties' were gay" we cannot be entirely sure what he meant. By the 1940s, though, it is clear that "gay" was a word being used by homosexuals to refer to homosexuals. Earlier versions of the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggested that it might have been even later than that, but the latest edition has clear citations from 1941.

It is even less clear when "gay" started to mean "stupid". The *Oxford*

Gay pride: There is a danger that people using gay in a denigrating sense will be interpreted as denigrating homosexuals.

English Dictionary gives a quotation from 1978, but it is rather ambiguous.

The new use appears to have begun in the United States. By the late 1990s, when we carried out the Language in the Playground research project at Victoria University, it had spread to New Zealand primary schools.

The origin of this new usage remains obscure. Did it arise from the homosexual meaning, from the careless meaning, or did it arise in some kind of reverse slang – the kind of thing that makes "wicked" and "bad" mean "really good"? Despite the recency of the new meaning, it is probably not possible to say.

It seems clear from the usage it was getting in New Zealand primary schools in the late 1990s that not all the people who use "gay" with this new meaning associate it with homosexuality, although many of them are aware that "gay" can mean different things.

In itself, this is not surprising. Polite people will call a child a "cheeky sod" without considering the relationship with Sodom and Gomorrah. To the pure, all things are pure.

Of course, there is a danger, as has been claimed, that people using gay in a denigrating sense will be interpreted as denigrating homosexuals.

THIS is a perennial problem – think of the words for mental handicaps that it is no longer politically correct to use for people who just don't appear to be acting particularly logically, and the terms of racial abuse that have passed from normal use in recent times.

The name of the dog in *The Dambusters* is one recent example of how upset people will get about something which once didn't raise an eyebrow.

The problem is, do we do more harm than good by making all of this explicit? Do we have to drag sexual preferences into the classroom? Perhaps we should just tell children that "gay" is not a very polite word, as we do when they use other words they have picked up from older peers without realising their true implications in the adult world?

Whatever we do, we will not kill off the usage quickly. It may die by itself (do you still think things are "grouse" or "groovy"?), or it may take longer to fade away. There is always the danger that making it into a really bad word will make it all the more tempting to young users.

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