

Abstract: The shock of the new: Evaluative adjectives are whack!
Arnold M. Zwicky, Stanford University
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Sociolinguistic studies of variation and change focus largely on phonology, less on syntax and morphology, little on the lexicon. This paper begins an exploration of lexical variation and change in internet writing, language that is informal, unguarded (largely inattentive to strictures of “standard grammar”), and ostentatious (displaying attitudes and personas). We focus on a set of words easy to track by Google searches: evaluative adjectives that began life as nouns, verbs, or longer adjectives – “How whack is that?”, “she’s so sketch. i HATE sketch people.” These we call “whack adjectives” (WAs), after one of the earliest attested items.

Many WAs began in hip-hop or drug culture, but have spread beyond these confines. In the informal language of young people, they add to the rich stock of vernacular evaluative adjectives: wicked, phat, shitty, lame, gay ‘lame’, cool, fucked, etc.

Phonologically, there’s a strong tendency for WAs to be monosyllables ending in voiceless obstruents (20 of our first 22 WAs); either the source words have this shape, or they’re shortened to have it. We see six potential sources for WAs (multiple sources are likely):

- (1) Reduction from past participle, probably by lexicalizing t/d-deletion:

ADJECTIVE

fuck	fucked ‘messed up, awry’
w(h)ack	w(h)acked (out)
freak	freaked (out)
sketch	sketched (out)

- (2) Reduction from adjective, noun, or particle-taking verb:

ADJECTIVE

w(h)ack	wacky, wacko, whack off
freak	freaky, freak out
sketch	sketchy ‘under the influence of drugs, messed up’
stink	stinky

- (3) Direct conversion from verb: stink, suck, wank, w(h)ack.

- (4)-(6) Direct conversion from noun, via reanalysis of nouns occurring in positions interpretable as adjectival:

(4) From predicative constructions with mass nouns, along the “fun” axis (That guy is fun > how fun (of) a guy): shit, crap.

(5) From N1 + N2 compounds with count N1 understood predicatively (my lawyer brother), along the “giant” axis (a giant party > how giant (of) a party), a reanalysis encouraged by the compounds’ adjectival stress pattern: dick, asshole, wuss, ditz.

(6) From GenXso examples with “so” modifying predicative NPs (That’s so 1999, so L.A., so linguistics professor): pimp, ghetto, fag(got).

WAs develop semantically by increasing their evaluative component vis-a-vis their descriptive component, along a path of subjectification (Hopper & Tragott 2003:sec. 4.3.2): drug-related items (freak, sketch) come to mean merely ‘messed up, awry’; items referring to human beings (prick, fag(got)) extend to abstract situations; and any item can be bleached of descriptive content, marking merely evaluation (negative for “suck”; positive for “pimp”; both for “cunt”): How faggot am I? ‘What a doofus I am!’.

In the world of WAs we see new items constantly recruited, high-frequency items reduced to expressively “tough” monosyllables (associated with masculinity in personal names (Cutler et al. 1990)), and items transformed semantically into pure evaluatives. On the social side, this variation is still largely opaque: WAs are tied to overlapping communities of practice in ways hard to discern from on-line corpora, and express subtle shades of expressive meaning equally difficult to track.

References

Cutler, Anne; James McQueen; & Ken Robinson. 1990. Elizabeth and John: Sound patterns of men's and women's names. *JL* 26.2.471-82.

Hopper, Paul J. & Elizabeth Closs Traugott. 2003. *Grammaticalization*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.