FUNNY-FEELY WORDS IN ENGLISH

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Since I am not a trained linguist and in writing this paper am straying far from my fields of competence, I wish to register a caveat. This is not an academic paper, for all that I have tried to make it as sound as it is possible for an amateur to do. Especially, I feel uneasy about my forays into historical linguistics. I do not know Old English or enough about the history of the English language, let alone French, German, Latin and Greek, to speak with any assurance. All citations of dates and derivations that are unequivocally stated are from _The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary_, not the result of independent research. Educated and even wild guesses as to derivation are always (I hope) labelled as such. I am aware that I leave many gaps and, for the rest, include much of dubious academic value. Therefore I would like this paper to be taken simply as a report from one native speaker about a class of words that is both alive and thriving in the popular language, though generally ignored in the teaching of English abroad.

My approach was admittedly random. In the future I want to make the lists more complete and more useful by annotating them. Oddly enough, the latter seems a more attainable goal. Exhaustiveness is extremely difficult because of regional variations in the use of -y adjectives,
the ease with which they may be coined for some occasion and forgotten about, and the high turnover rate of the most popular words, this last a characteristic of slang in general. For example, twenty years ago, icky was current and a vital part of most children’s vocabularies in the United States. Today, yucky, an ablaut rhyme of icky, seems to have almost supplanted the earlier word, doubtless aided in this by much repetition of the former on “Sesame Street.” Yucky carries the same meaning and is used exactly as icky was. Both mean “exceedingly disagreeable.” The question is whether to treat them as one word or two. It is possible that yucky does differ in one respect, that is, in forming rhyme groups with a few of the strongest taboo words in use today.

But let me begin by explaining why this -y suffix and colloquial and slang vocabulary in general interests me as a teacher of English to speakers of other languages.

INTRODUCTION

Students of English in Japan and elsewhere around the world tend to be taught a rather bloodless, lifeless variety of English, sometimes called “international English.” What this is has not been prescribed by any one recognized authoritative body, but seems to be defined similarly wherever English is taught to speakers of other languages primarily for use as a tool of practical communication.

It is only natural that a rational approach to studying a foreign language will presuppose a choice about what aspects (especially, what vocabulary items) of the language are essential and what aspects are dispensable or safe to defer until the essentials are mastered. Words and structures with limited applicability are rightly neglected. But this is decidedly different for English than for languages which are not recognized international languages. For most students of English, the pared-down international form is considered adequate even for those who are considered fluent. This is the case precisely because English is used as an international language by a great number of people whose native language is not English and who acquired the language from teachers with similar approaches. Much dialog in English occurs between people who have learned it as a foreign language and who therefore tend not to use or even know certain usages, and because even native speakers outside their home territories tend to have learned to restrict themselves to the more limited international variety of their language which, in any case, very loosely corresponds to formal English. The existence of a number of dialects of English (American, Australian, etc.) which are most distinct at the colloquial level also seems to justify restricting international English to common formal usages.

People learning Japanese, to take a contrasting example, will generally first be taught the standard formal language, but even before an acceptable level of
adult vocabulary has been attained in this and while this is being worked on, students will begin to be gradually introduced to more colloquial forms and vocabularies that will enable them eventually to understand and be understood by the average untravelled Japanese. Of course, for any language, it takes talent and a considerable commitment of time to progress to the level where ordinary conversations between native speakers are comprehensible, but for several reasons Japanese cannot be as easily simplified for use as English can. The student of Japanese can rarely use it with anyone but native speakers of that language, and native speakers tend not to edit their speech even for foreigners. In speaking with a foreigner, many Japanese will alter their speech, but often not in ways that aid understanding. Sometimes this results in severe distortions in speech which make comprehension impossible even for students who are capable of understanding normal Japanese. For example, some people will employ as many gairai (loan words from English and assorted other languages) as possible, as they would not in normal speech. People who do this are trying to be helpful, but gairai, because they seldom sound like the original and because they tend not to be taught in class when prevalent native forms exist, usually only make things worse. By far the most common alteration met with is slower, more careful pronunciation. This certainly is helpful, but it is seldom accompanied by vocabulary editing for there is no general sense of what words might be known by a student at various stages in the study of Japanese. Therefore, because the burden of understanding is generally on the non-native student, not only the usefulness for rational purposes of communication, but the frequency of use by native speakers must be considered in teaching Japanese as a foreign language. This is true of most languages. English is an exception. 

In general, I must say that the existence of a restricted, rational form of English is a positive good. But there are some problems. Students in Japan (and elsewhere) are often misled into thinking that they are learning American English or British English when what most students are actually learning--from American, British or Japanese teachers alike--is almost always international English, with even pronunciation differences flattened out. They are then unrealistically distressed about their ability when confronted with the living forms of American or British dialect on television, in movies, or on visits to the country where it is spoken. I am not referring to the skill of comprehension of normally paced, clear, formal English, which may be wrongly neglected in the Japanese secondary schools. Rather, I mean to emphasize that hearing will inevitably be a problem even to the well-prepared, advanced student of a good English course, not only because ordinary speech is always less clearly enunciated than formal speech but also because of the large amount of new vocabulary he will encounter when informal English is used.

International English is a variety of formal English, and formality in English
is expressed in clear, careful pronunciation (fewer or no contractions and less elision), moderate to slow speed, and formal diction (no slang, fewer idiomatic usages, fewer colloquial and "colorful" words). It is this last, the question of diction, that is the hardest to teach, and is therefore often avoided by teachers. Slang and idioms, which are soon dated in any case, are seldom taught for use in speaking, for the teacher is well aware of the danger of their slipping into otherwise formal diction. Unfortunately, much that is merely colloquial usage (but frequently heard) is also considered dangerous for the same reason. A diction mistake in English is received as amusing and will usually be laughed at. Native speakers often take advantage of this humorous effect to disarm audiences at formal meetings and to prove that they are folksy, not stuffy. But such humor unintended is only embarrassing and so, perhaps to save the students' feelings as well as time in the classroom, relatively mistake-proof English has become the norm. As I have said above, this is not necessarily bad. But it is unfortunate that English as taught (and especially "English Conversation") is not understood more widely as the properly limited form of English it usually is. Much discouragement could thereby be avoided.

Persons who have gone beyond the normal course to study English literature or linguistics are well aware of the richness of English vocabulary and, through long study of its best manifestations in literature, probably have command of richer vocabularies than the average moderately-educated native speaker. But even here there are gaps. There are classes of words used with great frequency in speech which are not found with equal frequency in the written language, even in literature, and which are too colloquial, carrying strong but imprecise connotative meaning in addition to the denotative meaning, to be included in most spoken English courses. It can be argued that the habitual, careless use of such words in ordinary colloquial conversation by native speakers is regrettable, and that their overuse tends to blur semantic distinctions which ought to be preserved. The fact that these words are used, even with great frequency, ought not, the argument might go, lead us to legitimize the doubtful practice by teaching them. In fact, these words are generally not taught, even to native speakers, but picked up as part of the oral language. And for many reasons, orally transmitted language seems to carry a heavier than usual affective burden. Colloquial and slang vocabulary and usage may not be as precise in some ways as the more formal language, but without it a whole range of meaning and much pleasure would be lost. I am not suggesting that learners of English apply their limited time and energy to learning this rather unstable vocabulary, item by item. But there are some broad categories of non-formal affective words which, when seen as a group to follow certain patterns of formation, usage and meaning, can be understood even when encountered for the first time.

I would like to discuss one such class of words here. These are adjectives
which can be most conveniently labelled -y words, with subcategories of -double-letter +y words, -sy words and -dy/-ty/-ity/-ety words. For example, shiny, messy, tipsy and rickety. Possibly because of the association with the hypocoristic addition of -y to names and familiar objects, these words often, if not always, have a familiar and comfortable, sometimes affectionate or playful feeling for the user. Frequently, but not always, they also carry a slight condescending or disparaging connotation, and the form is far more frequently derived from words with negative or disparaging denotations than not. The formation is nearly always made with native Anglo-Saxon vocabulary or borrowed words which are mistakable for words of native origin, which also helps to explain the familiar feeling these words carry. Obviously foreign words (generally adopted from or through French) feel colder, more abstract and intellectual. Except for some forms extant from the Middle English period or earlier, -y words are emphatically not formal. Using one in an otherwise formal sentence in a formal situation will evoke smiles both because of the diction slip and because these words are friendly and not very serious. Even used in anger, -y words tend not to be taken too seriously. Words in the -double-letter +y subcategory particularly are considered childish and are thus often avoided by men, who are more careful of their dignity than women. Native speakers are aware of the playfulness in the formation of these words (except in some of the oldest forms) and are not at all loath to coin their own versions in speech. This trend is especially strong in Australia and America where -y words are in far greater use, and more new forms are being invented than in England. Australians and Americans seem to be more casual and playful, less respectful of their language than the English. In the United States, Madison Avenue, not known for its respect for the language, may have something to do with this. Product names and advertising slogans abound with examples of -y formations presumably in hopes of cashing in on the home and hearth associations they carry. Most of these are nouns, not adjectives, but they contribute to a general trend toward acceptance of the adjectival form as well. Some examples are plastic sandwich bags called “Baggies” (the nuances added by the -y are “small,” “convenient” and “familiar,” though most people had used waxed paper before), a chocolate caramel candy roll called “Tootsie-Roll” (with a word play on tootsie meaning “honey” or “sweetie” when applied to a young woman) and a metal spiral toy called “Slinky” because of its sinuous, slithery movements. I don’t know whether Americans actually produce more -y words, or only seem to because they move into general use much faster than would be the case in England or Australia. This is not to say that they are considered formal, but Americans seem to like to spice up their language with slang, and this is much in evidence even in the written language of such publications as “Time” or “Newsweek” to say nothing of the oral transmission of new usages made possible by radio and television. But the modern facetious temperament which delights in
these words can also certainly be found in England these days. Witness the word
telly, surely a word one might have expected to gain currency in America. Strangely, it sounds as distinctly British to my ear as lift or lorry. Cockney slang also comes to mind as a particularly rich source of -y words. But ultimately, the usage of -y words is not restricted today to any group, class or locality. Only the choice of which -y words are used may differ. -Y adjectives are not as well preserved in literature as words derived from and squarely in the written tradition. As with most words in the oral tradition, only the best of them are likely to survive, though this too may change as methods and technology for the transmission and preservation of the oral language improve and gradually replace some of the functions formerly reserved to the written tradition. Certainly, formerly locally restricted uses are, through the mass media, gaining broader currency, and new forms are picked up much more quickly than ever before. But whether the mass media contributes to prolonging the life span of what would otherwise be short-lived linguistic trends or rather to a more rapid turnover of popular language is not yet clear. What I am presenting here, however, is not so much a new body of individual vocabulary items to master as a suggestion as to how to interpret them, how the form itself determines and informs the meaning and usage of the words. So I will not discuss frequency, constituency or geographical distribution of usage except in passing, though these are questions of considerable interest to me.

Although in this article I will be discussing only -y adjectives, I should remark briefly on the -y nouns from which it is supposed that much of the affect of -y adjectives derives. The -y added to proper names as a diminutive, affectionate suffix is not older than the affective adjectival suffix -y itself, but it does predate and seems to have influenced the connotations of familiarity, mild condescension and/or affection that the adjectival suffix -y now carries. The earliest recorded appearance of the hypocorist -y attached to nouns was in 1400 in Scottish pet forms of names (sometimes spelled -ie). This usage continues to the present and is related to other diminutive usages such as humorous nursery rhyme language ("Goosey, Goosey Gander" and "Hickory, Dickory, Dock," for example), two-word nonsense jingles (for example, hokey-pokey, from hocus-pocus, and hence hanky-panky meaning "underhanded business"), and baby-talk (examples include jammies for "pyjamas," potty for "toilet" and go beddy-bye for "go to bed"). Clipped forms of words like jammies are by nature diminutives. The -y sometimes adds an affectionate, playful, childish nuance (grannie, hanky, nightie and bossie are examples) and other times affectionate condescension (as in tootsie and old fogy). Later formations tend to incorporate more negative nuances, (for example, looney from lunatic, hippy from hip meaning "aware", bolsbie from Bolshevik and commie from Communist). In these last examples, it is not only the -y but the clipped form which shows lack of respect. Druggie
(a drug addict) and alkie (an alcoholic) are also negative and carry the sense of "addicted to." Not quite so negative, but amusingly disparaging, while carrying the sense of "addicted to," are words such as trekkie (a person who would never miss the popular television program "Star Trek") and groupie (a rock-star fan).

The relation of this hypocoristic and later derogatory -y to the adjectival suffix -y is clearly one of association rather than derivation and it only gradually took hold. Modern adjectival formations, however, tend to depend strongly on this association and thus are almost always considered undignified, trivial and colloquial. This will become clearer as I discuss the historical development of the -y adjective.

FORMATION

DENOMINAL DERIVATIVES

Overall, the greatest number of -y adjectives are denominal, that is, formed by adding the suffix -y to nouns. Deverbal and deadjectival formation cannot be found in Old English and only very rarely in Middle English. In the Modern English period, however, deverbal formation, especially from certain shapes of verbs, has been very common. It seems even to be favored in present-day English.

In Old English, adding the suffix -ig to a substantive was one way of making adjectives. This corresponds with the -ig adjectival ending still current in many Germanic languages. For example, in modern German, the suffix -ig added to nouns yields adjectives with the meaning "characterized by the presence of" or "possessing in quantity," etc. Although figurative use is also possible, the suffix is neutral emotionally. It is believed that in Old English similarly there was no special feeling attached to the suffix. The word crafty, for example, in Old English (craftig) meant "skillful," "dexterous," and by a slight extension, "clever" and "ingenious." It was not until the Middle English period that it took on the additional meaning of "cunning" or "artful," and this may have been through association with words like witchcraft. Whether the derogatory Middle English meaning was used only seriously or not, that is, whether it indicated only serious criticism or could also be applied in a casual or humorous way, I do not know. But at least it can be said that during the Middle English period extended and figurative usages increased, as additions to older words as well as many new words appeared.

The new words were derived in three ways. The greatest number were formed on the same pattern as the Old English -ig adjectives, that is, substantive +y (or -i/ie) and, in general, they had not only concrete reference to the substantive they arose from, but from the start figurative (metaphorical) application as well. One example is fiery which meant, as one would expect and as it still does,
“characterized by the presence of fire” or “possessing fire, in quantity” but which also was used to describe ardor or passion in persons. In this case, it is fairly certain there was no casual or humorous usage because even now the word is not used facetiously or condescendingly. Naught, which is a late Middle English word formed from the substantive naught + y, is now mostly used in reference to children and its sense of “wayward” is a later development, dating from the Modern English period. In Middle English, it meant simply “poor,” or “possessing nothing.” Wily (wile + y), on the other hand, meant “cunning” but the negative meaning was carried over from the substantive wile and was not added with the suffix -y.

In trying to date the beginning of the association of the suffix -y with the playful negative feelings that now attach strongly to it, examples from Middle English are inconclusive. Negative connotations were common, but neutral and positive connotations were even more so, for example, happy (hap + y) meaning “fortunate,” “apt,” “felicitous”; trusty (trust + y) meaning “reliable,” “trustworthy”; worthy (worth + y) meaning “valuable,” “good”; thrifty (thrift + y) meaning “successful,” “fortunate”; and tidy (tide + y, where tide was “time” or “season”) meaning “good in condition or appearance.” It seems that through the Middle English period, the suffix -y still had only a neutral, adjectival sense, though application of figurative meanings in describing persons, especially, was expanding, and it is probable that this was important in the later development of affective meaning.

The second way in which new adjectives ending in -y were brought into English in the Middle English period was through adoption from French. The number of words adopted into Anglo-French and thence into English was, of course, very large, but not many were retained in the English -y adjectival form we are focussing on here. Most -if adjectives from Old French survive in the feminine -ive ending and are thereby clearly recognizable as the Latin through French borrowings they usually were (though the related Latin suffix form would be -ate). Some duplication occurred historically, as when the Middle English hastif and hasteive coexisted, but by the Modern English period hasty (a back-formation from hastif or its plural hastis, it is believed) had edged hasteive out. The massif-massive-massy cluster is probably the only one that survived in all three manifestations (though the -if form is substantive not adjectival, it probably came from the now lost -if adjectival form). Other Anglo-French -if adjectives that passed into English and were naturalized as -y adjectives include jolly from jolif, testy from testif (teste (head) + if) and tardy from tardif(e), all in the Middle English period. Although the Old French -if adjectival ending derives from the Latin -iv(um/us) and is apparently not historically related to the Germanic -ig which is believed derived from the Latin -ic and/or the Greek -ik (meaning “characterized by”), there are strong functional parallels between -if and -ig. I do not know how strong the final (f or s) sound was in Old French,
but it seems likely that at least by the Middle French period it had become soft enough that in oral transmission it would seem to have disappeared. Forms such as *joli* in Modern French show that in some cases at least the *j* was eventually dropped completely. In English, though not in the other Germanic languages, the final consonant *g* disappeared during the Middle English period. It is not impossible that this disappearance was partly due to the influence of the phonetic form (weak final consonant) of the French *-if* adjectives and suggested by the functional parallelism of *-if* and *-ig*. In any case, this *-y* category of words assimilated these borrowed French words so completely as to make them feel part of the older familiar Anglo-Saxon family. Most French vocabulary that entered English at and after the time of the Norman Conquest has remained recognizably Anglo-French, if only by virtue of the non-native affixes which tip us off. The *-ive* form, with no phonetic parallel in Old or Middle English, is like most Anglo-French vocabulary, emotionally neutral and formal. But *massy, tardy, hasty, jolly* and *testy* look like, feel like and act like native substantive *-y* adjectives. The *-if* adjectives were received from French ready-made, already in adjectival form, but if, as seems clear from the relationship of *testif* to *testa* (*tête* in Modern French meaning "head"), *-if* was an adjectival suffix added to nouns, functionally if not historically corresponding to *-ig*, it must be supposed that although the words were borrowed whole so to speak, their parts were recognized. Thus, new formations could follow. The process would have seemed a simple continuation of past practice, and not the analogy it really was. Some of the *-ig* words in Old English were adopted ready-made from Old Teutonic, Old Norse and other Germanic languages, while others were newly formed on the same pattern.

Of course, a correspondence to adjectival formation in other European languages was not absolutely necessary for a foreign word to find inclusion in the *-y* adjective category. Numerous examples exist of words with purely accidental similarity of form borrowed from other languages. In a sense, all other examples of *-y* word formation could be placed in a third category marked miscellaneous, as there are so many different patterns as to appear without pattern. In a later section I will try to outline the most productive of these source patterns for *-y* adjective formation, but without trying to put them into an historical context. Most of them, as will be seen in individual examples offered for denominal and deverbal formations, are the result of mistakes. The role of misunderstanding in semantic change is far greater than is usually thought, especially in word groups like *-y* adjectives which depend so thoroughly on oral transmission. One example of an inference of identity when in fact there was none etymologically may be seen in a words like *easy*. Experts may even now make distinctions, but I shall try to demonstrate that the average language user has not, and the result has been an overruling of the experts with widespread usage of *easy* as a native *-y*
Middle English words like easy and privy (with a -y adjectival suffix that came through the Old French -e, -ee from Latin -atu-, -ata, and related to the separately borrowed -ate adjectival suffix) seem little different from native -y words of the -ig tradition as far as the affective meaning is concerned. The triviality and decadence of certain of their uses even before the Modern English period testifies to their early full membership in the native -y adjective class, though if only derivation is considered they perhaps should be in the more austere company of words like duchy and county. Alternative derivations from their substantives or verbs +y may offer some idea why these words and not others were picked up, but nothing can be clearly ascertained. Privy early took on the sense of "covert" beyond the denotational "private." Its use in such phrases as "Privy Council" now feels archaic and a little quaint, but the quasi-substantive form meaning "outhouse" is still current as might be expected. Easy, too, has respectable denotations, though less elevated and more comfortable, but its continued vitality may best be seen in current meanings of "laid back" and "loose," not at all excluding the sexual implications.

Given what we know of modern mistaken formations (for example, pea as the singular of the collective noun pease in the 17th century, or the frequently seen American tendency to use the singular noun kudos, (from Greek meaning "praise,") with plural forms of verbs which will probably pave the way for the appearance of kudo on the analogy of bravo), there is every reason to believe that in the confusion of the Norman Conquest, during which and for the two centuries thereafter Old English was left to itself, ceasing to be the language of the educated, cultured classes and thus less controlled by a conservative literary elite, and becoming a language transmitted primarily by oral means, word formation very often proceeded on questionable association of forms that seemed the same because they sounded the same. Unquestionably, this was a time of great expansion, not only of vocabulary but also of affix forms by which individual lexical items could be transformed to produce fine gradations of meaning. Beyond this, however, it was the occasion for the kind of grammatical simplification of Anglo-Saxon English that oral transmission in the absence of strong conservative efforts seems generally to tend to. This is not to say that English became less expressive a language, but that its expressiveness became less dependent on built-in (and therefore ultimately limited) formal devices such as verb inflections and more on facility in using prepositions, compound verbs and other key grammatical words for expressing relationships. Word order also became far more important. All of this has made English more a language that explains than one that defines and this is the meaning of what has been called the flexibility of English.

Parenthetically, I might add that the split in English diction occasioned by
that great influx of French and Latin vocabulary through Anglo-French is still felt in the modern language. This is what makes possible a system in which formality in speech or writing is marked most clearly by diction, choice of words. Informal, colloquial and slang vocabulary is weighted heavily towards the more vivid and emotionally expressive Anglo-Saxon side. Presumably, had English not borrowed much of what would become the intellectual and formal vocabulary, but built onto the native base, or had borrowed more slowly, we would not now, for example, be able to call our extensive and much used vulgar vocabulary "four-letter words" and thereby mean that our strongest feelings are habitually expressed in Anglo-Saxon vocabulary. Nor would -y adjectives have retained so clearly the familiar feel of homely words to the present had the form also continued to be needed to express neutral connotation. A kind of division of labor evolved. The influx of neutral foreign vocabulary, along with the hiatus in the native literary tradition, in a sense freed Anglo-Saxon vocabulary from responsibility. To the learners and observers of Norman French, the example of foreign words with seemingly set definitions and prescribed usages must have made their own language feel less intimidating and more alive and receptive to the users' intended meaning. -Y adjectives seem particularly to reflect the feeling of ownership with the accompanying permissiveness in the native language at that time, but nevertheless, the modern playful attitude toward word formation in this -y adjective category is probably not responsible for many of the forms that date from the Middle English period. Unintentional mistakes leading to analogical formation were still the most common, though nursery rhyme usages already portended a more whimsical future for this class of adjectives.

A more certain example of mistaken analogy than easy or privy mentioned above is another word from the Middle English period, petty (later petty), a phonetic rendering of the French petit. Originally it was used as a synonym for small but as the affective character of -y words emerged early in the Modern English period, the connotations of "trivial," "unimportant" and "inferior" appeared and gradually prevailed over the neutral connotation. Interestingly, despite its -double-letter +y form (more reminiscent of childhood than -y alone), it carries a strong feeling of contempt and is rarely used affectionately.

One factor probably affecting the developments of both denotation and connotation is subjective need to express some meanings more than others. In a logically balanced language (there is none such) one might expect an antonym for every possible lexical morpheme. A look at the following list, however, shows that -y adjectives expressing variously amusement, disgust and disappointment with the small size or amount of something far outnumber the ones meaning large in some way. And of the words denoting large, three are archaic and one is neutral in connotation. Only two are playful and only one has a negative connotation. This is biggity which describes persons who think too
well of themselves or their positions. Still, the form -ity is so undignified and big is such a simple, comfortable word that biggity functions more to deflate than to deliver an effective insult. Note also that as applied to persons, it is not bigness or importance that is being scorned but the assumption of it by people who are really small and unimportant. (This list is not strictly denominal, nor can it be, as it is based on denotation.)

SMALL
1. humorous and childish
   tiny
   teeny-tiny
   teeny-weeny
   teensy-weensy
   bitty
   itty-bitty
   bitsy
   itsy-bitsy
2. variously negative
   skimpy
   shrimpy
   sketchy
   scanty
   measly
   petty
   paltry
   piddly
   puny
   runty
   dinky
   rinky-dink

LARGE
1. archaic
   vasty
   massy
   hugy
2. neutral
   bulky
3. humorously negative
   hulky
   biggity-ety

I will discuss the present affective value of -y adjectives more fully in a later section, but here I want to mention something that relates to the historical development of the meanings and hence usages of these words. Contrary to what would seem to be common sense today, that is, that slang and colloquial vocabulary will move into the standard and even formal language as it gains acceptance and widespread use, the movement of -y adjectives was for many centuries in the opposite direction, away from formal English. Many words that existed and were thoroughly respectable before began in the Middle English period to be tinged with the affect that the whole -y adjective category was gradually taking on as new and clearly popular forms were increasingly being formed.
The new elegant vocabulary borrowed from French and Latin seemed to strengthen by contrast the comfortable feel of the native vocabulary. New -y adjectives were derived more and more from a word pool that was consciously colloquial or even vulgar, that is from Anglo-Saxon root words or completely naturalized foreign words that phonetically resembled the native words and thus could be mistaken for them. The 16th century was not as productive or as uninhibitedly playful in the formation of these words as the 19th and 20th centuries have proven to be, but it was certainly a turning point. As great numbers of new -y words appeared and as already extant -y words took on new figurative meanings, the often mildly disparaging, always homely flavor that we now associate with these words became firmly established.

Some older words that took on new figurative and affective meaning in the 16th century were _crusty_ (which originally meant “hard” like a crust, but came to also mean “short-tempered” or “curt” by 1570), _thrifty_ (which meant only “thriving” in Middle English but took on the additional sense of “frugal” or “parsimonious” by 1526), _chary_ (“sorrowful” in Middle English but “cautious,” “stingy” and “suspicious” by 1542), _testy_ (“headstrong” in Middle English but only “irritable” and “resentful” by 1526), _giddy_ (“possessed” or “insane” in Old English and “affected by vertigo” in Middle English, but also “lightheaded,” “flighty,” “frivolous” and “inconstant” by 1547) and _moody_ (which was related to various states of mind or feelings in Old English, became “proud” or “headstrong” by 1460, and “subject to bad moods,” “ill-humored” or “melancholy” by 1593). New coinages in the 16th century included _crazy_ (“full of cracks,” “flimsy”—1576), _saucy_ (“insolent” or “presumptuous”—1530, with the nuance of “wantonness” added before 1603), _tetchy_ (“peevish,” “testy”—1592), _haughty_ (“proud”—1530), _crabby_ (“churlish,” by association with crab-apple—1550) and _clumsy_ (“heavy and awkward,” “ungainly”—1597).

A glance at these words, all used to express some disagreeable or at least laughable human character or personality trait, will give one an idea of the general trend in -y adjectives. This list is short but really quite representative. _Testy_ and _tetchy_ are perhaps the most negative, but they describe nothing more evil than the kind of irritability that most families have at times to put up with in one or another of their members. I will not go on with lists by centuries, but only note that by the 18th century -y adjectives became even more decidedly colloquial and, frequently, slangy. And the fact that so many of the great number of -y adjectives coined in the 19th and 20th centuries were current only in certain segments of society (for example, among university students) or for only a few years before dying out attests to the flexibility and popularity of the formation as well as to the slangy and therefore often transient character of many of the words now being invented.

Substantives which lend themselves most readily to -y adjective formation
are native single-syllable, commonplace, concrete nouns, to which the suffix -y adds the meaning "full of," "characterized by the presence of," or "similar to," etc. Certain categories of nouns are particularly productive. Natural phenomena, vegetation, food, animals and parts of animal and human physiology are rich sources. But interestingly, certain categories of everyday things that satisfy the above requirements are almost completely unproductive, for example, furniture.

I don't know why. We can say pillowy and cushiony to mean "soft," and boxy to mean "square and bulky," and even cupboardy meaning "close" or "stuffy" was once current though now it is obsolete (late 19th century Cockney slang). But we do not say *chairy, *ruggy or *desky, and beddy only substantively (and therefore probably derived hypocoristically) in the child's word beddy-bye meaning "good-night," despite their seeming appropriateness. If one considers various household items to try to imagine why they are so unproductive of -y adjectives, it becomes apparent that items carrying a single and yet broadly applicable sensory image are far more likely to be found in this form. Pillows and cushions are soft and so pillowy and cushiony mean "soft," but they also carry the comfortable associations of home, sofa and bed. They are simple metaphors and fall into the "similar to" pattern. We might also say pillowlike or cushionlike with no denotational difference. Aside from the obvious fact that pillowy and cushiony are shorter and easier to say (a strong recommendation for popularity in English which greatly favors short forms in general), the feeling of these -y words is quite different from their -like counterparts. -Like is also a native adjectival suffix, from the Old English -lic and related to the Old English líc meaning "body," "form," or "likeness," so the difference isn't in comparative familiarity. -Like has not been as productive as -y in forming durable words, but it is capable of being applied far more broadly than -y because it carries no particular selectional restrictions except as regards the form of the root it joins, which should be a concrete noun. In contrast to -y, which has an affective component that makes it somewhat resistant to arbitrary combinations with emotionally neutral, polysyllabic and foreign words, -like, being itself neutral, goes almost anywhere. Not only deshlik and chairlik, but television-like and even kitchen-cabinet-like are possible, although as the words get longer hyphens are commonly used. The more improbable, impossible-sounding combinations tend to delight us as whimsical, but they also tend to be considered temporary constructs, take-apart words. The existence of the free morpheme like may contribute to this attitude.

With the territory marked out by the -y adjectives thus sketched out, I now want to offer a few lists, not exhaustive but lengthy enough to give an idea of what kinds of words have produced the most -y adjectives. Most of the words are commonly used in extended or figurative senses as well as or instead of in the concrete "full of" or "characterized by the presence of" senses. The lists
are intended to be of denominal -y adjectives (grouped according to the de-
notation of the noun) but some deverbal forms may have crept in the cases where
a noun and verb form both exist and take the same shape. Within each group,
the words are separated into three columns indicating their usage in making what
I have called primary, secondary and tertiary references (concrete, metaphor-
ical and associational). The words in column III are without exception but
not necessarily exclusively capable of describing persons or characteristics or
qualities of persons. Here, however, a word will only be listed in the most ex-
tended figurative catagory that it may be fitted into. Hence the emptiness of column
I. In group 1 (animals and animal anatomy), this emptiness corresponds to
linguistic reality, as most of the words in column III are not used in any concrete
sense. But in the other four word groups this is less the case and the spareness
of column I is more an artifact of my methodology. Column II words, it may
be noted, tend to draw on simple sensory images, but sometimes, as with mong-
grelly for example, there is a more complicated concept involved. I would also
like to insert the caution here that a number of the words listed in column III
are related to the figurative meaning only by mistake. For example, crabby does
not come from the animal but from the apple, but most people are not aware of
this and so the animal association, far-fetched as it must be, is in people's minds
as they use the word.

## DENOMINAL -Y ADJECTIVES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. ANIMALS AND ANIMAL ANATOMY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>I.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wormy</td>
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<tr>
<td>mosquitoey</td>
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<tr>
<td>maggoty</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### 2. FOOD AND DRINK

- **I.**
  - bacony
  - eggy
  - oniony
  - garlicky
  - lemony
  - cinnamony
  - minty
  - fudgy

- **II.**
  - meaty
  - gristly
  - carroty
  - spicy
  - yeasty
  - chocolaty
  - buttery
  - creamy
  - cheesy
  - lardy
  - milky
  - watery
  - floury
  - doughy
  - bready
  - toasty
  - cakey
  - grainy
  - ricey
  - beery

- **III.**
  - corny
  - measly
  - mushy
  - porky
  - beefy
  - salty
  - peppery
  - fruity
  - peachy
  - saucy
  - sugary
  - syrupy
  - soupy
  - vinegary
  - oily

### 3. NATURE AND ELEMENTS

- **I.**
  - bogy
  - fenny
  - marshy
  - swampy
  - hilly
  - hummocky
  - mountainy
  - deserty
  - reeisy

- **II.**
  - starry
  - craggy
  - rocky
  - pebbly
  - gravelly
  - sandy
  - coppery
  - silvery
  - tinny
  - glassy
  - marbly
  - chalky
  - ashly
  - clayey
  - loamy
  - tarry
  - pitchy
  - smoky
  - gassy
  - vapory
  - wavy

- **III.**
  - steamy
  - airy
  - fiery
  - earthy
  - stony
  - brassly
  - steely
  - flinty
  - starchy
  - soapy
  - bubbly
  - oily
  - greasy
  - tidy

### 4. WEATHER AND CLIMATE

- **I.**
  - windy
  - rainy
  - snowy
  - sleety
  - puddly
  - showery
  - blizzardy
  - muggy
  - smoggy
  - sunshiny

- **II.**
  - hazy
  - cloudy
  - muddy
  - dewy
  - wintery
  - summery
  - springy

- **III.**
  - icy
  - chilly
  - frosty
  - gusty
  - breezy
  - squally
  - stormy
  - foggy
  - misty
  - sunny
5. VEGETATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I.</th>
<th>II.</th>
<th>III.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>jungly</td>
<td>bushy</td>
<td>weedy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meadowy</td>
<td>branchy</td>
<td>seedy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>forestry</td>
<td>twiggy</td>
<td>reedy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>woody</td>
<td>mossy</td>
<td>nutty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>leafy</td>
<td>heathery</td>
<td>crabby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ferny</td>
<td>thistly</td>
<td>flowery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grassy</td>
<td>brambly</td>
<td>woodsly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>turfy</td>
<td>thorny</td>
<td>backwoodsly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>piny</td>
<td>spiky</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>blossomy</td>
<td>spiny</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>briery</td>
<td>husky</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>burry</td>
<td>tassly</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>rosy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>palmy</td>
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<td></td>
<td>cottony</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>rubbery</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Next, I’d like to look at another similarly productive class of nouns, human anatomy, in greater detail to see what can be discovered about the formation of their -y adjectival forms and the evolution of their meanings. This list is as complete as I can make it, but doubtless there are words I have missed, especially obsolete usages. Words that are quite possible if somewhat poetic-sounding because they are not idiomatic, like _fingery_ or _knuckly_, are not dealt with here. The categories are somewhat arbitrary of course. I hope that they will be taken as approximations of rather than presumptions of fact.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I. PRIMARY:</th>
<th>II. SECONDARY:</th>
<th>III. TERTIARY:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CONCRETE</td>
<td>METAPHORICAL</td>
<td>ASSOCIATIONAL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCE</td>
<td>REFERENCE</td>
<td>REFERENCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;(prominently)&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;similar,&quot;</td>
<td>metonymic relation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;present&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;like&quot;</td>
<td>to root</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| bloody     | *toothy      | bloody       |
| nosy       | *hairy       | hair         |
| *throaty   | *fleshy      | nosy         |
| *skinny    | sinewy       | throaty      |
| toothy     |              | skinny       |
| hairy      |              | head         |
| fleshy     |              | handy        |
| sinewy     |              | hearty       |
| bony       |              | cheeky       |
| leggy      |              | brainy       |
| hippy      |              | nervy        |
| chesty     |              | gutsy        |
| bosomy     |              | lippy        |
| busty      |              |              |
| whiskery   |              |              |
| dimply     |              |              |
| pimply     |              |              |
| warty      |              |              |
| fatty      |              |              |

The words in column I all mean “having lots of” or “conspicuously possessed of.” In fact, they are used almost exclusively to express an abundance of that
bodily part or the predominance or importance of that part in relation to the whole. Someone who is "toothy" seems to have more or larger teeth than usual. His teeth are a conspicuous, identifying feature. We also say "toothy smile" with the obvious denotation. The other words follow similar patterns except for bloody which seems never to refer to unspilled blood.

The rareness of overlap of concrete and figurative meaning and the lapse of concrete meaning in nosy, throaty and skinny which are all current in figurative senses would seem to indicate that as the more interesting extended meanings took hold, concrete meanings lost ground. Nothing is ever that simple, however, and toothy and hairy are examples of words that once were used metaphorically but have receded back to their more concrete meanings. They are obsolete in the secondary sense. The case of hairy is further complicated by the much later emergence of what I have called a tertiary meaning. In Middle English, hairy meant "similar to hair" or "hair-like" but these meanings have been lost. Very recently (and possibly only in the United States) it has taken on a significance that is related to hair only by association, one imagines, with an idiom containing the word hair. This is the meaning of "difficult," "frightening" or "risky." I assume it comes from the idea in "miss by a hair (=hair's breadth)" or "make it by a hair" where hair means a very narrow margin. Also, the usage "hairy experience" is reminiscent of "hair-raising experience" and this may have also influenced the new usage.

Fleshy and sinewy can be used in the sense of "-like" but the usage is restricted. Fleshy meaning "flesh-like" is used only in reference to the flesh or pulp of fruit. Whether the transference occurred in the noun or the adjective first is not clear. Sinewy meaning "tough" or "stringy like sinews" appeared in the 16th century. It also appears farther afield in the sense of "elaborate," as applied to arguments, possibly affected by the similarity to the word sinuous meaning "twisted." Bloody is the only other word in column I with figurative meaning. It might be argued that uses such as "bloody battle" are metaphorical and that bloody also should be listed in column II. However, even in simple metaphor bloody remains concrete in its reference, and thus a "bloody battle" is one in which much blood was shed. It is an arresting image (and surely was much more so when it was fresh), but whether this is an extended meaning of bloody is debatable. There is another (chiefly British) figurative use of bloody, though, which is not at all ambiguous. This is as an intensifier which seems to have come from an earlier now obsolete expletive, "God's blood"/"'s blood," but may simply have been a back-formation from the adverb bloodily, its prior existence mistakenly inferred. The fact that bloody appeared very early, however, in the Middle English period, seems to suggest the former.

It may be seen that even though some column I words have figurative meanings, these are not the primary meanings. Whereas the most commonly used
and understood meanings of all the words in column I are the concrete ones, directly related to the given body part, this is true of none of the words in column III, except bloody and hairy of course. None of the other words in this column refers concretely to the noun, that is, body part, from which it was formed in any of its meanings, and only skinny, nosy and throaty ever did so historically.

Originally, in the 17th century, nosy meant "having a conspicuous nose," but now it is never used in that sense, perhaps because of the strength of its associative meaning. Nosy now means "irritatingly and invasively curious," perhaps influenced by the idiom "stick one's nose into other people's business." We also have the verb nose about which doubtless refers to how dogs behave. Similarly, we cannot mean that a person's hands are conspicuous or large or noticeable by the word handy. But in this case the meaning was not lost; it never existed. The meanings of "skillful," "useful" or "near at hand" are the original 16th century meanings. The possibility that the word developed from the word handicraft, rather than from hand + y, or was at least influenced by the word handicraft, may offer one explanation for the absence of concrete reference.

Handy has entered the language more formally than nosy. It seems that words like nosy, which are used to describe to disadvantage the character, mood, or temperament of persons, are least likely to be acceptable in formal diction. Also, the further the meaning ranges from the concrete, the more informal, even slangy the word seems to become. Obviously, none of the words in column I can be used to describe the character or a characteristic trait of persons. Bloody might be used to express disgust with a person but is more likely to have a general situational referent. Hairy only applies to situations. But all the words in column III except heady and again of course bloody and hairy are primarily used in this way.

Throaty and skinny might have been put in column I except that their meanings are oblique, in different ways. In specialized vocabulary throaty once referred to animals with extra folds of skin around the throat. But this concrete meaning is obsolete. Now throaty means "gutteral" or "husky" and refers to the quality of a voice, "coming from the throat." In the 16th century skinny meant "consisting of skin" or "skinlike" but both these meanings have been lost. The current meaning of "thin or emaciated" appeared in the 17th century, possibly related to the idiom "to be skin and bone" with no flesh between. A 19th century meaning, "miserly," possibly from skinflint, has also disappeared.

Brainy also is oblique in its reference, but for yet another reason. This word seems to be of relatively recent vintage as a -y adjective, but its figurative meaning of "intelligent" or, one step again removed, "intellectual," did not come with the addition of the -y. In Old English, brain referred to the substance within the skull, but in Middle English this substance was assumed to be the organ or seat
of thought, memory, sensation and imagination. And so, in the Middle English period, the figurative meanings of “intellectual power,” “intellect,” “sense” and “imagination” were added. Since, indeed, as far as we know even today, these Middle English period assumptions about the functions of the brain were correct, brainy referring to the actual functions, though not to the substance, of the organ does not seem strictly metaphorical. But in that it differs from most of the words in column I in referring to the function rather than the appearance of the body part, it is removed from what we call concrete reference.

Heady is a Middle English word, but despite its age, it seems never to have carried a concrete meaning. From the earliest recording, heady has meant “headlong,” “precipitate” or “violent” (referring to events or actions) and “headstrong,” etc. (referring to persons). From the late 16th century, it took on the additional meaning of “intoxicating” or “stupefying” (referring to events or things). Eventually, the “headstrong” meaning, applied to persons, lost currency.

Of the words that describe traits or character of persons or of deeds done, only handy, hearty, bloody and perhaps skinny can also be used to describe things. And only handy and hearty, the oldest words, are not disparaging. The others are all more or less derogatory, though in speech nerdy, gutsy and brainy can be uttered with grudging admiration as well as with disgust. Brainy is not very bad, but intelligent would be a better choice if one wanted to convey respect for the intelligence being described. Cheeky means “impertinent” and tends to be used mostly in reference to children, usually affectionately. When used to describe an adult, it diminishes that person’s dignity. It is also frequently used to describe small wild animals like birds and squirrels which are not afraid to come close to people and bother them. Nerdy is an old word and so might be expected not to be derogatory, but the senses in which it is now used are relatively recent. The original meanings of “strong” and “vigorous” are obsolete. There are two current meanings, but as far as I can tell, they do not coexist. The meaning of “nervous” or “excitable” is British. In the United States, it means only “insolent,” “brash” or “presumptuous.” Nosy also took on its negative meaning well after the word itself existed. I could find no dates for gutsy, lippy or brainy, none of which is listed in the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary. Gutsy and brainy are listed without dates in the Random House College Dictionary. I suspect they are all fairly recent, though possibly 19th century. Gutsy is very similar in meaning to the American usage of nerdy, but it also can mean “lusty” and “vigorous.” Lippy has a tough flavor, probably through association with the phrase “don’t give me any of your lip” meaning “shut up” or “no excuses.” Lippy just means talkative, however. It is the most slangy of the words on this list.

I have written rather glibly of the changes in meaning that have occurred in many of these words, especially those in column III, suggesting that possibly significant factors in the semantic changes were popular idioms, clichés or proverbs,
of which one of the words was the word in question. Clearly, this can be no more than a working hypothesis until more evidence can be accumulated. But it seems to me to be an area of some potential for study. Phonetic influences on word formation such as the synaesthenic properties of certain consonant clusters have been studied far more than the effect of collocationally related words, that is to say, words that repeatedly appear together in discourse. The bonds between the various items in a collocation group are variously weak and strong, but it might be supposed that habitual linkage of a single word in a fossilized idiomatic phrase would likely result in at least less resistance against that word moving toward the (almost always figurative) sense of the whole idiom in one of its senses. This new sense could be considered a clipped form of the idiom. I have no evidence to support my suggestion, but nothing in my limited observation thus far excludes this as a possible (indeed probable) source of influence for semantic change, among others certainly. One other possibly relevant reason for exploring this kind of mental association as a route in word formation is the data gathered by psycholinguists on what they call the syntagmatic response, in contrast to the more logically sophisticated paradigmatic response. Syntagmatic associations result in collocation sets. In a test situation, subjects are given words and asked to free-associate. The "primitive" response seems to be syntagmatic, that is, an attempt is made to complete sequences in a familiar way, with words that seem to belong with the tested item. Granting that this response is said to be more common in children, and may be more playful than not, does not detract from my suggestion when the word category we are talking about is one that is clearly indebted to a less than fully adult and serious approach to language.

Proper language, like proper etiquette, naturally intimidates many people, who feel they must defer to language experts who alone can reassure them that they aren't making mistakes. This is a perhaps too small part of the self-consciousness and insecurity of our age to worry much about. But it makes the gulf all the greater between formal and popular language. Popular language is comfortable and permissive and for the most part orally transmitted. Mistakes, so called, do not live on to haunt one as they might in the written language. People feel very relaxed with this language and in some ways proprietary, considering themselves experts on it regardless of age or level of education. 

DEVERBAL DERIVATIVES

Deverbal derivatives are in general a later development, first appearing in Middle English in about the 13th century, but not very productive until the Modern English period. By now, they may even have outstripped nouns. The oldest forms include droopy, wieldy (now found almost exclusively in the negative
form *unwieldy; wieldy* is used, but usually as a self-conscious back-formation from the negative and is most often accompanied by a self-deprecating smile), and *sleepy* meaning "sleep-inducing" (the present meaning is broader, including "desire to sleep").

It may be too fanciful, but I wonder if deverbal formation like this can be related to the -ing form of the verb. Since substantives were used adjectivally even in Old English, and one formation of substantives was from verbs in the -ing form, the adjectival use of -ing forms was possibly felt to be denominal. The fact that in speech the difference between *drooping* and *droopy*, for example, is not very great also suggests that the two forms may have been confused or blurred, resulting in deverbal -y adjective formation.

Another perhaps more defensible guess as to the origin of deverbal forms is that they may have originated from substantives with identical forms to the verbs they correspond to, resulting in confusion as to whether it was the noun or verb that generated the -y adjective. In cases where the dates cannot be established for the noun and verb forms, there is no way of knowing. And once confusion entered, the field would have been free for inventiveness. Certainly deverbal formation gives much broader scope to would-be word coiners. The opening up of this derivation path helps to account for the amazing growth of this vocabulary in the Modern English period.

Like nouns, many verbs tend to be productive or not depending on their ordinariness, their shortness and their concrete meaning, but in addition, certain classes of verbs may be described as productive types based on their verbal suffixation (which, circularly enough, is in turn related to meaning in most cases). A surprisingly large number of the verbs contributing to the -y adjective form are -er or -le verbs. For example, *clatter, twitter, splutter* and *rumble, jingle, rustle*. Perhaps this should not be surprising though since these verbal forms are almost exclusively onomatopoeic or symbolic, at least in the sense that they represent sounds and/or movements translated into the sound system of English. Marchand argues well for the formation of almost all the words in the -er and -le classes solely on their symbolic sound value, not neglecting to credit other generative sources such as borrowed or received words (noting however that they may have had similar symbolic value in the original language), and rhyme and ablaut variations from other words or word clusters suggesting a feeling or sensory perception. He claims that both -er and -le verbs should be considered compounds of "symbolic elements." Neither is a suffix on a proper root or basic word. Sometimes a seeming root exists, but on investigation the root often is found to have come after the longer word. For example, *twink* (1400) is more recent than *twinkle* (c. 1100), and *fizz* (1665) appeared after *fizzle* (1532). Note that both forms can take the -y suffix. We can say *twinkly* as well as *twinkly, fizzy* as well as *fizzy*. But the denominal forms are more likely to be associational,
negative and slangy (*tinky*, for example, now means "stupid," "naïve" or "effeminate") while the deverbal forms are more metaphoric in a recognizably sensory way.

Both *-er* and *-le* verbs denote sound or movement. Marchand makes a slight distinction in nuance between the type of movement, deciding that *-le* verbs tend to denote shorter, jerkier movements, while *-er* verbs suggest repetitiveness. But the distinction is considerably blurred by the phonetic consideration that appears to come into play in deciding which ending will appear. *L* in the root excludes *-le* as the final element. Likewise, *r* excludes *-er*.

Because this distinction between *-er* and *-le* verbs is only interesting, not directly relevant to the discussion of *-y* adjectives except as they are one productive class of roots, I will list the two together here in a somewhat less organized and digested form than before. Most of these words along with other deverbal and denominal forms will appear again at the end of this paper in lists organized by semantic reference. Here, in addition to demonstrating even with this by no means exhaustive list the great number of possible *-y* formations from only two types of verb, I wanted to suggest the importance of synaesthetic factors both on meaning and on association of meaning. For *-y* adjective formation, synaesthetic collocations may, for certain types of stem words, prove more significant than purely semantic collocations. In making this list, there were times when I faltered, wondering whether in fact I was familiar with a certain word. The form itself, the pattern, is so familiar that one is conditioned to believe in the words it produces. I did check though, and I believe that what follows is a list of real words. The clipped forms in parentheses, sometimes but not always derived by back-formation, are invariably more slangy and removed from concrete reference even to the sound symbols than the longer forms. In a few cases, they may be related to the word beside it only in my imagination, but I do not claim imaginativeness for this. I think the same associations might be made by anyone.

Lest this remarkable list lead anyone to think that these words constitute the bulk of the deverbal *-y* adjectives, let me emphasize that very many other shapes of verb are also productive, in particular, single-syllable verbs of native origin which are the most likely to appear in verbal idioms and, through a similar process to the one for substantives, that is metonymy, yield vivid *-y* adjectives with vivid associational reference.

**TWO TYPES OF DEVERBAL *-Y* ADJECTIVES**

1. *-er* type
   - blabbery
   - blustery
   - blistry
   - blithery
   - clattery
   - cluttery

2. *-le* type
   - babbly
   - bubbly
   - bumbly
   - bungly
   - bustly
   - cackly

   ruffly
   - rumbly
   - rustly
   - scribbly
   - scrambly
   - scuffly (scuffy)
chattery (chatty)          chortely          shuffily
dathery                  chuckly                  sizzly
dithery                  crackly                  sniffly
dodderly                 crinkly                  snuffly
fluttery                 crumbly                  sparkly
flustery                 crumply                  sprinkly
fickery                  dangly                   squiggly
fluttery (flitty)        dapply                   strangly
glittery                 dawdly                   tangly
glimmerly                diddly                   tickly
jabbery                  draggily (draggy)       tingly
lumberly                 dribbly                  tinky
littery                 drizzily                  trembly
puckery                 faddly                   trickly
quavery                  fizzly (fizzy)            tumbly
sputterry                frizzly (frizzy)          twinkly (twinky)
splattery                fumbly                   waddly
spattery                gabbly (gabby)          waggly (waggy)
splattery                gaggly                   warbly
shattery                gargly                   whcedly
scattery (scatty)        giggly                   wiggly
skittery                grizzly                   wobbly
shuddery                grumbly                  wriggly
shivery                  gurgly                   wrinkly
showery                  hustly                   lusty-bustly
sloberry (slobby)        hustly-bustly           jangly
slithery (*slithy)       jiggly                   jiggly
shimmery                 jingly                   jingly
smothery                 jingly                   jingly
splinterly               jumbly                   jumbly
tetterly                mottly                   mottly
tottery                  muddly                   muddly	
tittery                 mumbly                   mumbly
twittery (twitty)        prickly                  rambly
wavery                  rambly                   rambly
whimpery (wimpy)         rattly                   rattly
whisperry              ripply                   ripply

DEADJECTIVAL DERIVATION

Deadjectival formations of -y adjectives seem first to have appeared in the 14th century, only a century or so later than deverbal formations. But very few examples of this formation are available and most there are are archaic or obsolete. This should not be surprising. One surviving example, fatty, may offer some insight into the formation. Fatty might have come from the adjectival, substantive or verbal form of fat. They are all the same. It is certainly likely that word clusters like this led to confusion about the “rules” of -y adjective formation, and if, for example, someone knew the word fatty and assumed that it was derived from the adjective fat, he could then model other deadjectival formations on that. Actually, in the case of fat, deadjectival formation is a strong possibility not a blind guess since the adjective form preceded the others, but it is not certain because all three forms were extant before fatty appeared. Still, since there already was an adjectival form, fat, the question is why another adjective is wanted. One might suggest that the -y makes the adjective more obviously
adjectival in cases where it is hard to distinguish it from its homonymic and homophonic noun and verb forms. This is a rational explanation, and might apply to a few other of the words in my list (below), for example, **crispy** and **chilly**, but it leaves most of the items unexplained.

The most commonly advanced explanation (offered as the only explanation in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*) is that -y had become or was becoming a suffix that “felt” strongly adjectival. But what is an adjectival feeling? Adjectives are lexical items attached to noun substantives. “Adjectival” simply means “descriptive of some relationship.” In grammar, it is defined functionally simply as an adjunct to a noun substantive. The effect on the substantive is attributive (descriptive) or limiting (narrowing the range of meaning). Thus, the added -y was unnecessary grammatically. That is, the -y added to adjectives doesn’t make them act any more like adjectives than they would without. In fact, by the Middle English period, substantives without adjectival suffixation were beginning to be used adjectivally (a use that expanded greatly in the Modern English period) as in “flower garden,” so that strictly speaking there was no need for even the denominal -y adjective. This development is believed to have hastened the demise of some neutral denominal adjectival suffixes, for example, -en which survives only in a few words like **golden**, **earthen** and **wooden**. But the -y suffix was not neutral and was in fact growing more and more specialized as to affect. It was therefore able to offer a meaningful alternative to the substantives used attributively as well as to adjectives. The difference between **wood** used attributively and **wooden** was negligible, although today a difference in habitual usage makes them non-interchangeable. But the differences between **wood** and **woody** or **woody** or between **wooden** and **woodeny** are well defined.

As we have seen, -y can express various relations to the stem it is attached to. These are “consisting of——,” “containing——,” “possessing——,” “conspicuously possessing——,” “possessing—in quantity,” “marked by an excess of——,” “of the nature of——,” “resembling——,” “reminiscent of——,” “associated in one’s mind in a direct or oblique way with——,” etc., *ad infinitum* it would seem. In addition, -y has, over the years, developed increasingly affective nuances of familiarity, triviality and negativity. The earliest was probably familiarity, with the natural association of having direct effect on the speaker or writer. Most likely, this is the nuance to be taken from words like **hugy** and **vasty** which are certainly not trivial, undignified or negative. **Vasty**, for example, might be interpreted as “something was vast and I was somehow affected.” Awareness of the observer is incorporated. So the -y added to adjectives most often did not adjectivize so much as subjectivize. That we feel many of these words to be “poetic” is, I believe, a relic of times (now past) when poets used -y as a device for bringing experience closer to the observers, poet and reader. The continuing movement of -y, however, toward nuances of triviality, worthlessness and
loathsomeness has, in more recent times, limited the poetic use of this device to cases where all the affect now carried by -y is appropriate or, ironically, where an archaic effect is wanted.

To summarize, -y can be merely neutral, expressing only adjectival function, when added to substantives and verbs, depending on the age of the formation and many other factors, but added to adjectives only the affective sense is significant. This is also generally true of -y added to substantives which are frequently or idiomatically used as noun attributes. For example, flower garden is neutral, but flowery garden (not a current or common expression) would feel somehow like an expression of how the garden is perceived by the speaker. Similarly, Christmas present is straightforward while Christmassy present would tell us that the present, whenever given or received, is felt by the speaker to be redolent of Christmas. (Christmassy, by the way, is a very commonly used -y adjective.)

One rather common if not much approved modern derivation of deadjectival -y adjectives is from -ish adjectives, for example, yellowishy or waspishy. Here, the slightly disparaging and diminishing effects of -ish are intensified by the addition of -y. The most interesting of these words (if indeed it is derived from -ish and not laterally from icky) is ishy which is used broadly to express strong disgust or distaste. It is in very common use in the United States, particularly among children, but it is not entered in any dictionary I have been able to consult, not even dictionaries of American slang. Even if it were, I doubt its origin could be definitively given. So I feel free to imagine that this delightfully pure expression of negativity comes from -ish and -y, the closest these two have come to becoming words in their own right for all the independent meaning they carry. Parenthetically, I might add that -ish is also commonly added to -y adjectives, a practice more accepted than the other way around. Examples include prettyish, dowdyish, sleepyish and old-jogeyish. In fact, almost any -y adjective can take -ish though the result, if too unwieldy, will not be very much used.

One other interesting example of a deadjectival -y word is comfy which is a short, clipped form of comfortable and means “comfortable and cozy.” It is said to have originally been a nursery word but it is widely used today, mostly in a folksyish way.

The following list of deadjectival -y adjectives, like my other lists, is not meant to be exhaustive, only suggestive. Words dating from the Middle English period to the end of the 19th century are listed relatively chronologically in column I. All are archaic or obsolete except for those marked with an asterisk. Words in column II are all 20th century formations or at least unlikely to be very old.

**DEADJECTIVAL -Y ADJECTIVES**

I.  
  fatty*  
  moisty  
  crispy*  

II.  
  waspishy  
  yellowishy  
  girlishy
slippery*  boyishy
leany       womanishy
hugy         ishy
haughty*    yellowy
chilly*     orangy
fainty       woodeny
blacky       woolleny
whity
greeny
paly
dusky*
vasty
dampy
bleaky
lanky*
pinky
purply
goody
bluey
comfy*

AFFECT

A much repeated theme in the discussion of -y adjectives and indeed the most important aspect of them is the affect or feeling that so many of them carry. As has been said, these include familiarity, comfort, warmth, affection, nostalgia, childishness, triviality, humor, disapprobation, contempt, etc. Very few are completely neutral. Which of these affective connotations a given word carries and the strength of that affect are determined by a great variety of factors. These factors are rarely independently determinative, but I shall try to list them as if they were, in order to summarize and state clearly what was often only hinted at above.

The shade, tone, strength and kind of affect varies depending on the following:

Currency: Archaic or obsolete forms tend to sound poetic and distant rather than familiar. Examples include vasty, massy, Jenny, plaguey, slippy and sweepy.

Age: Still-current words from before the Modern English period are almost all neutral in affect in at least one of their meanings. Recently coined words are the most likely to feel slangy, folksy or to carry a strong depreciative nuance.

Length: The words with the strongest negative affect tend to be built on single-syllable Anglo-Saxon or seemingly Anglo-Saxon words. One prototype of this can be seen in words like icky, yucky or isky, another in words like bloody, crappy and shitty. Words of more than two syllables +y, on the other hand, tend to have strong humorous flavor. Needless to say, length of a word alone does not determine affect.

Suffix Form: In general, -y words feel as if they, the words themselves, belong to the user, just as adding -y to the names of persons or objects makes them related to the user. Adding -y seems to be a way of emotionally appropri-
ating outside phenomena, of bringing them into our personal spheres.

Double-letter -y words always feel more homey and familiar than words with -y alone. Examples include fussy, messy, scabby, grubby, sloppy, puffy and potty. Happy, pretty and funny are exceptions to this, probably because of their age and because the root words are not widely recognized or remembered.

Other by-forms of the -y suffix include -sy, which sounds tauntingly insulting and more playful than -y alone, and -dy/-ty/-ety/-ity, which carry a strong humorous flavor and more than a hint of nursery rhymes. -Sy is not prolific, but a few examples will show the general feeling. Tipsy, folksy, flimsy and clumsy all take on a more negative feeling by association with childish and deflating forms of address such as tootsy-wootsy andopsy-wopsy. They are primarily irreverant. -Dy/-ty/-ety/-ity also often feel childish and deflating, but the feeling is more innocent than with -sy. For example, biggity (or biggely) and uppity are words used to prick the pretensions of conceited, affected people. But use of words with this cluster of suffixes marks the user too, as a country bumpkin, a small child, hopelessly out of date or self-deprecatingly humorous. Thus the most common reason for employing them is to disarm other people. Some words are truly reserved for children. Except humorously, no adult would use scaredy-cat or fрайdy-cat in conversation with another adult. Fрайdy- (clipped from afraid) of course has a -y rather than -dy suffix, but as one item in one of the rare synonym pairs that are exactly equivalent in meaning and usage, the feeling from scaredy-bleeds over into fрайdy-.

Rhyme and Repetition: The presence of repetition, rhyme pairs or ablaut rhyme pairs (whether singly or severally, whether incorporated into one idiomatic or hyphenated usage or present only by implication, in our minds) tends to reduce the seriousness of words and make them humorous. They delight us. Examples of the hyphenated type include the above-mentioned tootsy-(wootsy) as well as topsy-turvy, fuzzy-wuzzy, clickety-clackety and hustly-bustly. The last two have similarly hyphenated noun forms, click-clack and hustle-bustle.

In addition, rhyme and repetition encourage associations with other words and help to broaden the applications and extend the meanings of words. Rhyming synonyms like fuzzy and muzzy which reinforce each other are common. Ablaut rhyme seems to be the source of a great many of the figurative, extended meanings of -y adjectives. For example, not only is touchy strengthened by the existence of testy and tetchy, it may very well be that touchy took on its meaning of "testy" or "tetchy" by association from those words. Flurry (as in "flurry skirt") is without any root but seems to take its sense from words like flare, full and fluff, and flabby appeared as a less crisp version of flappy. Words expressive of sound or motion are particularly likely to have this type of relationship, because of the sound symbolism in certain consonants and consonant clusters and to a lesser extent in vowels. Thus sappy, soppy and soupy are all associated in our minds
through the wet consonant /s/ in their full range of meanings and are now used almost interchangeably.

Rhyme plays an indirect role in much -y adjective formation, as it is very important in influencing which possible root words will be picked up and which of the -y adjectives will be the most strongly affective.

Word blending, an ever more popular method of -y adjective production, naturally results in related rhyme pairs. Lewis Carroll is famous for his whimsical formations, but a more useful example would be smoggy (from smoke and fog) rhyming with foggy. Gawky, which seems like a blend of gangly (or gad/god perhaps) and awkward, actually is believed to come from a north English dialect word gaulick, but its easy association with its synonym awkward is undoubtedly significant in its adoption into general use. One suspects that if gawky had not existed, *awkky or some such word would surely have appeared by the 20th century, by which time -y words had appeared for almost every negative human trait.

One special type of rhyme association is related to the taboos on certain words. Thus ruddy came into general use as a bowdlerization of bloody, in the tradition of Cockney rhyming slang. Other examples include mucky and yukky which rhyme with two unacceptable words, sucky and *fucky, the latter of which is never found with the -y suffix, being too strong, ugly and serious in affect for even the most negative affect of -y. Naturally, many words formed in response to taboo are not -y adjectives. Rhyme and sound association are basic to many kinds of word formation in English.

A casual glance at the lists will reveal a remarkable number of rhymes and slant rhymes in the root words, and not only in the obvious final rhyme imposed by any suffix. The existence of such pairs as weepy-creepy, wimpy-simpy, dopey-mopey, baggy-saggy and moody-broody in which the rhyme is accompanied by a parallelism in both meaning and feeling as well suggests that the sounds have influenced the content, though historically the influence was probably mutual. In pairs like bossy-fussy, gabby-grubby and scrunchy-crunchy, it is possible to isolate consonants that suggest a certain affect because of sound association with a number of other words.

**Sound Symbolism:** Sounds quite clearly carry meaning in a systematic way. It is important to the affect what vowels and what consonants appear and whether they are long or short, initial or final. But this is not something that can be discussed fully here. A few examples will suffice. Long vowels generally connote slower and deeper movement than short vowels, open-mouth vowels feel heavier and larger than closed-mouth ones. In the word cluster sing, sang, sung and song, the possible symbolism is ignored, but in other clusters such as clip, clap, clop, we feel a progression from a faint, sharp sound to a heavy, dull one. -Y adjectives, because they frequently describe sound and motion, very commonly contain sound-significant vowels, and awareness of this in the user is increased
by the existence of ablaut rhyming near-synonyms. For example, *jingly-jangly, sniffly-snuffy, jibbery-jabbery, cibbety-cloppety* and *piddly-puddy*. Consonants and consonant clusters tend to be even more precise in their symbolism. As mentioned above, /s/ sounds wet or watery and /l/ frequently connotes duration. Thus /sl/ carries a stronger, in the sense of more negative, liquid meaning than /s/ alone. For example, *sloppy, slobby, slobber, slogggy, slosky, slusky, slurpy* and *slimy*. By extension, words connoting a liquid-like flowing movement also are enhanced by the /sl/. For example, *slinky, slithery and slippery*. /gl/ often carries a similar liquid feeling to /sl/ but somewhat heavier, as in *gloppy* and *gluey.* Another connotation of /gl/ can be seen in words like *glittery, glimmery, glisteny, gleamy, glossy, glinty, gloopy* and *glary*. /gl/ alone often feels more viscous than liquid, as in *goopy, goopy, gummy* and *gunky*. /gr/ is not liquid at all but rather carries a feeling that can be guessed at from words like *gritty, grimy, gravelly* and *grungy.* Another nuance of /gr/ possibly comes from association with the word *groan.* Examples include *grouchy, grumbly* and *grumpy.* /fl/ is contained in a great number of words describing movement of a generally awkward type, as in *floopy, flappy, stickery, flittery, flustery, flitty* and *flustery.* /bl/ suggests associations with the word *blow* as in *blowy, blubberly, blithery and blustery.* Some of these associations can be traced back to the older languages from which English developed, but there is no reason to doubt that analogies to mouth shape and natural sounds played a role in origins even so removed. Often a single phoneme set expresses many different feelings, some dependent on mimicry, others on association with word clusters of near-synonyms. For example, a large number of /skr/ words sound shrill or harsh, like *screamy* and *screechy, scratchy* and *scrawny, scrappy, scrubby* and *scrompy,* but even more are semantically related to the Old Norse words *skran* meaning “shrivelled” and *skrank* meaning “lean and large-boned.” For example, *scrawny, scraggy, scruppy* and *scrompty.* /k/ frequently carries similar associations, probably due to the interchangeability of these sounds in the old languages. We can see evidence of this in word pairs like *scraggly-craggy, scrunchy-crunchy, scrumpy-crumby* and *scrawly-crawly.* These examples have all been of initial sounds. Similarly, middle and final consonants and consonant clusters can carry the same or only slightly different meanings. For example, /t/ and /k/ sound as quick and sharp in the final as in the initial position. Thus, *chittery-clattery, twittery, flutttery, sputtery, chatter* and *ticky-tacky, clucky, clackly* and *clucky.* Finals like /p/ however seem to indicate a sharp stop (which is what they are phonetically) and the -y added does not detract from this in *clinky, flippy, dippary, snapppy* and *flabby.* The final /f/ is reminiscent of the feeling in *smash,* while /mp/ reminds us of *bump.*

Of course, none of these associations of sound with sensory impressions depends on the suffix -y, but the fact that words incorporating sound and motion symbolism are almost universally convertible into -y adjectives gives us some idea of the sensory receptivity of the -y suffix. Many -y adjectives do not have
strong or apparent sound symbolism, but those that do are stronger for it. Our first knowledge of this world was sensory and as infants we were totally dependent on our senses to relate to the tastes, smells, sounds, shapes and motions around us. With the development of linguistic skills, we gradually were weaned away from some of this dependence, but it probably was with mixed feelings that we saw language coming between us and our experience. We became to some extent alienated from the vivid directness of perceptions that had previously defined us. Why -y adjectives, themselves merely vocal artifacts, feel as they generally do, is a question for psycholinguistics and phonetics to answer, but surely it is deeply related to the value of certain sounds and mouth shapes as symbols of affect.

*Sensory Imagery:* Sensory imagery is not only related to phonetics, that is, sound. It also can come from the semantic meaning directly and indirectly from the sense of words, which is to say from relationships of words to other words. If a word carries reference to sensory perception, it will have stronger affect than a synonym which does not so refer, and it will tend to have broader application.

The sensory content of many words elicits almost predictable, physical responses that seem almost as much part of the words as the more consciously prescribed dictionary pronunciation or spelling. We can hardly say "snotty" without wrinkling our noses, or "tinkly" without modulating our voices. *Furry, feathery* and *scaly* make our fingers tingle so that more often than not the words are accompanied by at least a vague flutter of the hands. The closer to sensation, the stronger the feeling associated with the word, and the more likely gesture will accompany the verbal expression of feeling. It also is clear that the more diffuse the image, the weaker the emotive component. *Grassy*, for example, is only moderately strong. We think perhaps of rolling on lawns as children, or going barefoot, feeling the texture, but it is also visual and olfactory and in addition likely to be cluttered with idiosyncratic memories. Similarly, *woolleny, lathery, sudsy, bubbly, sandy, rubbery* and even *chocolaty* are strongly sensory but also diffuse in tending to be diluted with individual memories associated with these feelings. Accordingly, the emotional strength of these words varies widely from individual to individual. *Oozy*, on the other hand, carries a single sensory message with primitive strength that is almost precognitive. Words which evoke texture and consistency such as *oozy, gooey, gunky, gummy, fuzzy, sticky, slimy, lumpy, mushy, squaesy, squishy,* and *runny* are all very strong, because they take us back to the mud-pie days of childhood when we related to the world more completely through our senses and feelings.

*Extended Meanings:* In some ways similar to the two preceding characteristics that affect affect, this factor is broader and includes the others. The more concrete and literal the meaning conveyed and the more narrowly and conven-
tionally it is applied, the less affective, more ordinarily descriptive a word becomes. Words used metaphorically and figuratively tend to have stronger affect and also to feel more colloquial or slangy. Thus, meadowy and leafy, for all their pastoral associations and tactile references, have remained close to a neutral reference and are almost never used figuratively. Flowery and weedy, in contrast, while still current in their concrete senses, are far more often used in their slightly pejorative figurative senses of “overly ornate or elaborate” and “unhealthily thin” respectively. In the same way, sugary sounds and is less playful and interesting when it is applied to cake than when applied to a personality or a smile.

Root Word: It should be obvious from all the above that strength of affect will be greatly dependent on the denotation, connotation and usage of the root word itself. But it is worth repeating that -y will more often be affixed to some words than others, and the words most likely to take -y are those with the strongest affect themselves or, and this is extremely important, those which commonly occur in idioms with strong affect. Examples of this may be seen in the human anatomy list above. It seems, for example, that hairy very likely comes from a combination of “by a hair” and “hair-raising,” clipped and suffixed for convenience. Thus, the sense (that is, the system of linguistic relationships a word forms with other words) of the root will frequently be a factor in the formation of a -y adjective. And also, because of the lingering association with the idiomatic uses of the root word, the -y adjective will be enriched and strengthened in its affect.

Kind of Affect: Of all the different kinds of affect, negativity, variously expressed as dislike, contempt, disapprobation, etc., is the strongest. Explicit or implicit negative value judgments inherent in certain words or usages make them stronger and more vivid than words with neutral or positive judgments. But even here there are gradations. Thus, formations from expletives, like bloody, ruddy, mucky and crappy, aside from all their other strengths as metaphors and synaesthenic symbols, are especially strongly affecting because they are strongly negative. A more subtle example may demonstrate this point more clearly. Mushy is descripitive of the texture of mush and carries a negative charge, possibly related to the way many children feel about oatmeal and the like after they have in their own minds outgrown soft baby-food, whereas creamy with not so different a texture carries a positive charge. Partly because it is negative, mushy is stronger, and the negative meaning carries over into metaphor with extended meanings of “spineless,” “sentimental” and “unclear,” while the associations of creamy are closer to the concrete meaning of creamy. Neutral and positive -y adjectives tend to be more concrete in more of their applications, and thus poorer in association and in affect.

Freshness: Consciousness of a word having been made rather than feeling it as a given, a part of language passively received, makes it seem more alive
and powerful. Especially when the root from which the -y adjective was derived is lost or forgotten, some of the delight in the creation of the word or even awareness of its membership in this familiar and personal category is also lost. Thus, to a certain extent, this correlates closely with the age of the word as well as currency of the word from which it was derived. Dainty, heavy, busy and tidy are all almost unrecognizable as taken from the Anglo-French dainté (ultimately from the Latin dignitas), the Old English hæfig and bisig and the Middle English tid+y, and predictably they carry little affective sense. Possibly the last, tidy, has some small sense of picayuneness that makes it less than a good example. It is also different from the others mentioned with it by virtue of its root word being obvious, but that doesn't help because it is used in the sense of "time," a now archaic meaning. Similarly, worthy, trusty, healthy, hearty and weary are, it seems, too old and respectable to be much toyed with. Happy also seemed immune and certainly is more often used in the older neutral sense than not, but in the irreverent 20th century it took on the added meaning of "drunk" and it can be found in the related phrase slap-happy meaning "dazed" or "punch-drunk."

There are, of course, many ways in which a word can appear fresh. It can be newly minted, a word for a single occasion, formed by one person. For example, if I found a need for the image likely to be produced by it, I could say "scissorsy." If the word caught on and came into general use, it would to that extent lose its freshness, though not necessarily its force. Another way that -y words can appear fresh is through original uses and applications ranging far from its original or concrete reference. Like poetry, colloquial language and slang are better when not too hackneyed. But -y words, more than poetry, depend on originality that is built solidly on the familiar things in life.

Application: The greatest number by far of these -y adjectives describe how we feel about other people, their character traits, moods, personalities, behavior. The words are value laden and yet not alienating. We are connected by our feelings to the people we apply these words to and so even the strongest criticism couched in these words is not unmitigated at least by pity. If we call people "silly" or "crabby" or even "drippy," they are still related to us and we probably feel some affection for them. Other words are stronger and the link is less one of affection than the simple recognition that that person has gotten to you. The judgments are not cold and abstract, however negative. They are gut-level judgments. Most of these words are critical of people's faults: sneaky, grabby, grumpy, grouchy, snobby, snotty, snoty, stingy, finky, stuffy, sappy, sulky, weepy, etc. But there are, as can be seen even from this short list, fine gradations of disapprobation. Some faults are clearly worse than others. But all the words have in common, by virtue of the suffix -y, what might be called a put-down mechanism. Describing people with these words criticizes them and at the same
time tells them they aren’t worth our attention except insofar as they deserve the criticism. -Y adjectives applied to people work to deflate them. Thus, Richard Nixon was called “tricky Dicky” not at all out of affection but emphatically to deny him the respect and dignity he postured. Rather than burning anger, these words express contempt.

Really stuffy people probably hate being called “stuffy.” Nobody likes his deeply felt emotions to be labelled “sappy.” They know that they are not just being criticized, they are being teased as well. The words don’t hurt them so much as poke fun at them. They are not being taken seriously. Accordingly, calling a frightening authority figure “bossy” is unthinkable; being frightened precludes the use of these not-quite-serious words. A deeply depressed person perhaps shouldn’t be teased, but calling him or her “moody” or even meaner “broody” makes his anguish less frightening to the people around him. We use these words to describe characteristics in others (less frequently in ourselves) that affect us personally, and these words are a kind of defense. Of course, not all of these words carry the same power for everyone. “Crabby” may be a more or less serious accusation depending partly on personal idiosyncratic associations, family and peer group values, etc.

CONCLUSION

I will conclude this paper with a few more word lists. The first group of lists is of -y adjectives, however derived, that carry sensory (what I have called secondary referential) impressions. These tend to be neutral in value, synaesthethic and more or less delightful depending on how fossilized over time the images they carry are. The second group of lists is of -y adjectives that are applied figuratively to persons. Perhaps it is unnecessary to say here that numerous as -y adjectives used to describe persons are, they represent only a very small fraction of the total words available for such use in English. Denotationally, -y adjectives are too rough to satisfy the hunger for precision. They tell us as much about the observer as the observed. A glance at the following random list of formal, not to say pedantic, words for unpleasant human traits will make clear the comparative lack of depth and range of the -y adjectives.

**UNATTRACTIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF PERSONS (FORMAL)**

| loquacious | puerile | sadistic* | superficial* |
| gullible* | inane* | masochistic* | ignorant* |
| pompous* | intolerant* | neurotic* | insensitive* |
| taciturn | wanton | parsimonious | servile |
| opinionated* | crass* | defeatist* | cringing |
| phlegmatic | dogmatic* | chavínistic* | insolent* |
| blasé* | vitriolic | uxurious | abstemious |
| complacent* | desultory | epicurean | Machiavellian |
| punctilious | sardonic | profligate | peremptory |
| vapid | surreptitious | prodigal | querulous |
Only the starred words are commonly heard in conversation. But while no one would suggest dispensing with these and other precise words, many of them would not be understood by a great number of native speakers. For the purposes of normal, ordinary communication, then, the student of English as a foreign language would do well to postpone mastering lists like the above and at least familiarize himself or herself with the -y adjective lists that follow. There is no need to self-consciously produce them in the student’s own speech. That will come or not as the student is exposed to the everyday language.

I have divided the -y words used to describe persons’ traits or behavior into as many smaller categories as seemed necessary to make the general meaning and affect of most words clear. There are, of course, some words that resist categorization, but on the whole, it is surprising how few paradigmatic groups emerged and how crowded certain of them are. The categories are organized roughly on the basis of synonymy, recognizing, however, that the words in each group may be synonymous (or interchangeable without loss of meaning) in only some contexts. Naturally, words expressing general aversion will have more synonyms than more denotationally precise words. But exact connotational congruence is almost impossible among -y adjectives where so much of the meaning is affective and depends so much on associations and idiosyncratic emotional response. In every category, I have listed the words only in such order as might reveal interesting relationships to other words.

A brief glance through these lists reveals frequent striking similarities between words that mean approximately the same thing. The sound symbolism here is not at all subtle, it leaps off the page in some cases. Here, as elsewhere, my lists are not as full as I could hope, and are less than satisfactory also in narrowing the meanings down to a significant level.

As I stated at the beginning of this paper, the collecting of words was not systematic. And in all cases, I allowed myself, along with a few friends whom I consulted, to be the final arbiters of currency and sense. As the project grew, I became increasingly frustrated with dictionaries, especially the supposedly up-to-date American ones which all too frequently listed every meaning for a word but mine, or omitted words I feel certain are widely used in the United States. There is danger, I know, in naively believing oneself a model of proper usage (even of such non-proper words as these), but after considering the alternatives, I decided that using myself as a native-language informant as I compiled the lists would probably be of more use to people than doing a random dictionary sort, the results of which I would not, in any case, feel qualified to evaluate.

Parts of this paper were diachronic but for the most part my lists are
synchronic, my criteria being whether I and other native speakers were familiar with (having read or heard) or used these words. Dictionaries are weak on this point, editors generally being as slow to label a usage obsolete as to qualify a new word for inclusion. Perhaps my lists will not so much correct for this (for they have their own weaknesses, not least of which is the fact that they too will soon be dated) as fill a gap and complement other sources of information about -y words, especially as they are used by Americans. At the very least, I hope that they have amused you as -y words are meant to do.

SENSORY IMAGERY

1. LIGHT/DARK
   - dazzly
   - flashy
   - fiery
   - glowy
   - lary
   - glossy
   - gleamy
   - glittery
   - glimmery
   - sparkly
   - shimmery
   - shiny
   - sheeny
   - twinkly

2. TEXTURE/TOUCH
   - bristly
   - canvasy
   - cindery
   - crumby
   - crispy
   - crusty
   - crepey
   - downy
   - fuzzy
   - flabby
   - feathery
   - filmy
   - grainy
   - gauzy
   - gritty
   - grimy
   - gummy
   - gunky
   - gloppy
   - goopy
   - goosy

3. SENSATIONS
   - achy
   - crawly
   - creepy
   - dizzy
   - goosefleshy
   - headachy
   - itchy
   - prickly

   - dapply
   - mottly
   - blotchy
   - mucky
   - inky
   - murky
   - shaddy
   - shadowy
   - sootty
   - smudy

   - dingy
   - dusky
   - ink
   - mucky
   - inky
   - mucky
   - shaddy
   - shadowy
   - sootty
   - smudy

   - lumpy
   - gnarly
   - nappy
   - oozy
   - pasty
   - powdery
   - papery
   - pillowy
   - ropey
   - runny
   - rubbery
   - shaggy
   - shingly
   - satiny
   - spongy
   - squashy
   - squishy
   - slimy
   - sticky
   - slippery
   - stickly
   - tingly

   - tissuey
   - tufty
   - tweedy
   - velvety
   - woolly
   - waxy
4. **SOUND**

| buzz | clang | raspy | sputtery |
| bomy | clatter | ratty | spluttery |
| hang | clickety-click | rackety | spatterry |
| chirp | clackety-clack | rustly | splatterry |
| churrup | clippety-clop | rumbly | tinny |
| croaky | cloppety-clop | snippy | twitterry |
| craky | fizzy | snappy | twangy |
| clucky | gurgly | swishy | thrummy |
| clunky | jingly | squeaky | whirry |
| clanky | jangly | screeky | wheezy |
| clinky | noisy | screechy | yappy |

5. **APPEARANCE/SHAPE**

| tangly | crinkly | scraggy | flaky |
| twisty | frizzy | scratchy | wready |
| snarly | puckery | stringy | dumpy |
| snaggly | fluffy | slivery | boxy |
| knotty | frothy | spiny | bunchy |
| jumbly | foamy | thorny | baggy |
| topsy-turvy | floancy | spiky | saggy |
| wavy | billowy | pointy | rumplly |
| rippy | baloony | patchy | crumplly |
| rufly | puffy | wispy | wrinlky |
| curly | raggedy | lacy | knobby |
| curvy | jaggedy | spotty | bumply |

6. **MOTION**

| wiggly | lurchy | slinky | drippy |
| waggly | twitchy | slithery | bouncy |
| wriggly | flickery | swishy | jowcy |
| squiggly | quivery | fluttery | springy |
| squirrnay | quavery | fittery | lumpery |
| swirly | shivery | fitty | waddly |
| twirly | shudderly | floppy | shufly |
| twisty | trembly | flappy | limpy |
| turny | throbby | draggy | churly |
| whirly | shaky | draggily | swingy |
| windy | wobbly | droopy | tumbly |
| bendy | teeterly | dangly | zippy |
| jerky | tottery | drifty | zoomy |
| snappy | doddery | flowy | speedy |
| choppy | jiggly | trickly | lickety-(split) |
| quaky | wavery | dribbly |

**UNATTRAICTIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF PERSONS**

1. **BAD-TEMPERED/IRRITABLE/PEEVISH**

| crabby | waspy | tetchy |
| cranky | nasty | touchy |
| crusty | prickly | vinegar |
| crotchety | pricky | peppery |
| cratchety | huffy | stormy |
| grumpy | surly | fiery |
| grumbly | orneray |
2. RESENTFUL/COMPLAINING
sulky         snivelly         grumbly
pouty      teary             tattly
wimpy       blubbery          kvetchy
whiney      gripity           grousy

3. ODD/DISAGREEABLE/SOCially AWKWARD
drippy       finky             shnooky
twerpy       jerky             schleppy
creepy       nerdy             schmucky
cloiddy      nebbishy         
simpy         pilly

4. HATEFUL
icky          rummy             pukey
yucky        ruddy             farty
ishy         bloody             pissy
uggy         slimy             crappy
lousy         sucky             shitty
crummy       barfy             turdy

5. DECEITFUL/Cunning/MEAN
wily          stealthy           weaselly
crafty       slippery           foxy
tricky       scoundrelly       fishy
sneaky       roguey             finky
shifty       rascally           rat-finky
skulky       ratty              dodgy
shady         skunky

6. SELFISH/TIGHT
grabby       piggy              thrifty
graspy       hoggy             scrimpy
greedy       stingy             squirrelly

7. UNCLEAN/UNTIDY
cruddy       messy              scuffy
dirty         mussy              scuffy
funky         mungy              scurfy
filthy        scummy             slobby
grimy         scuzzy              sloppy
grubby        scabby             dingy

8. PHYSICALLY AWKWARD
clumsy       lunky              gimpyp
cloddy       gawky              klutzy
clunky        gangly

9. DRAB/RUN-DOWN/INFERIOR
mousy         tousy              sleazy
dreary      shaggy              schlacky
dowdy       scrubby             tatty
frumpy        mottly             tacky
frowsy        weedy              ticky-tacky
blowsy       seedy             
bowisy      shabby

10. DEPRESSED/DEPRESSING
gloomy        broody             wimpy
mopey         teary              droopy
moody        weepy              dreary
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Adjectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11. STUBBORN</td>
<td>balky, flinty, stony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. SLOW</td>
<td>pokey, draggly, putzy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dawdly, diddy, futzy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>draggy, tardy, straggly</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. INSANE/WILD</td>
<td>batty, nutty, dizzy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>buggy, potty, dippy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>balmy, screwy, kooky</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>barmy, funny, wacky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>crazy, scatty, wiggy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>looney, dotty, wingy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>loopy, daffy, zany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. STUPID/FOOLISH</td>
<td>dopey, goofy, lumpy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dolty, goony, silly</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dizzy, louty, simpy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dippy, lunky, fool-hardy</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. OFFICIOUS/OVERBEARING</td>
<td>bossy, preachy, blustery</td>
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<td></td>
<td>naggy, shovey, bustly</td>
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<td>16. SMUG/RIGID</td>
<td>priggy, starchy, WASPy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>stuffy, churchy, clubby</td>
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<td>17. ARROGANT/CONCEITED</td>
<td>cocky, biggity, snooty</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>haughty, huffy, hoity-toity</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>uppity, snobby, muckety-(muck)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>biggety, snotty, clubby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. HYPOCRITICAL/AFFECTED</td>
<td>fakey, hokey, arty</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>phoney, artsy, artsy-fartsy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. OLD/OLD-FASHIONED</td>
<td>creaky, moldy, stuffy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dusty, hoary, dodderly</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>musty, stodgy, fuddy-daddy</td>
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<tr>
<td>20. UNSTABLE/NERVOUS</td>
<td>antsy, fluttery, punchy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>edgy, fluster, leery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>jumpy, flummox, chary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>twitchy, skittery, queasy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>flighty, panicky, uneasy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>fidgety, giddy, uneasy</td>
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<tr>
<td>21. SENTIMENTAL/MAWKISH</td>
<td>corny, touchy-feely, soapy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>drippy, treacly, slushy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>gushy, sappy, schmaltzy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>mushy, soupy, shilly</td>
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<tr>
<td>22. INSIPID/INDECISIVE</td>
<td>mealy, wishy-washy, shilly-shally(verb)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dithery, shilly, shally(verb)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Adjectives</td>
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<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ingratiating/Servile</td>
<td>sugary, syrupy, smarmy, treacly</td>
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<td></td>
<td>simpery, flirty, oily, greasy</td>
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<td></td>
<td>slimy, snivelly, grovelly, sucky</td>
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<tr>
<td>Particular</td>
<td>busy, choosy, dainty, fussy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>finicky, fettishy, petty, picky</td>
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<td></td>
<td>pernickety, persnickety, prissy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Talkative</td>
<td>blabby, blabbery, chatty, gabby</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>gossipy, yamminory, newsy, wordy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>prosy, jabbery</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spiteful</td>
<td>catty</td>
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<td></td>
<td>snipey</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>nasty</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inquisitive</td>
<td>nosey</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>snoopy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Slothful</td>
<td>lazy</td>
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<td></td>
<td>slouchy</td>
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<td></td>
<td>poopy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vague/remote</td>
<td>dreamy, foggy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>fuzzy, hazy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>muzzy, muddly</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cowardly/Babyish</td>
<td>sissy, namby-pamby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>fraidy-(cat), scaredy-(cat)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irritating/Bothersome</td>
<td>pesky, leachy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>pesty, peskery</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dependent</td>
<td>clinging, sticky</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>leachy, wimpy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Impudent/Brash</td>
<td>bratty, cheeky, gutsy, lippy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>nervey, sassy, saucy, snippy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>smart-alecky, smarty-(pants)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rough/Tough</td>
<td>feisty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>scrappy, rowdy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>punky, hoody</td>
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<tr>
<td>LOUD/AGGRESSIVE</td>
<td>brassy, flashy, flossy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>glossy, gaudy, showy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>swanky, tawdry</td>
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<tr>
<td>Too Thin</td>
<td>skinny, scrawny, stringy, scraggy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>gangly, lanky, rangy, reedy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>weedy, wiry</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
37. TOO FAT/BIG/HEAVY
- fatty
- tubby
- chubby
- chunky
- pudgy
- porky
- fatty
- dumpy
- heavy
- husky
- paunchy
- beefy
- blocky
- burly
- hefty

36. DRUNK/OVER-TIRED
- boozy
- beery
- fuzzy
- groggy
- happy
- muzzy
- punchy
- slatty
- squiffy
- tipsy
- woozy
- slap-happy

39. LEWD/OBSCENE
- sexy
- lusty
- bawdy
- funky
- raunchy
- naughty
- racy
- steamy
- earthy
- dirty
- trashy
- smutty
- juicy
- oogly
- googley
- bitchy
- witchy
- minxy
- foxy
- goosy
- slutty
- easy
- randy
- gandy
- furry
- kinky
- quirkly

40. EFFEMINATE
- sissy
- faggy
- fruity
- twitty
- airy-fairy

ATTRACTION CHARACTERISTICS OF PERSONS

1. GOOD/GREAT/STYLISH
- dandy
- nifty
- groovy
- hunky-dory
- marvy
- jazzy
- funky
- kicky
- freaky
- wiggly
- peachy
- ducky
- toney(tony)
- trendy
- fancy
- natty
- swanky
- snappy
- snazzy
- classy
- ritzy
- zippy
- zesty
- smily
- rollicky
- peppy
- perky
- jokey

2. CHEERFUL/LIVELY
- happy
- jolly
- merry
- hearty
- sunny
- cheery
- chirpy
- bobbly
- twinkly
- sparkly
- jaunty
- bouncy
- springy
- frisky
- frolicky
- rollicky
- peppy
- perky
- zesty
- smily
- jokey