

ARSE LONGA, VITA BREVIS:
LAST WORDS ON 'HARMFUL HOMOPHONY',¹

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1. Praeludium

Over a decade and a half ago (Lass 1980: 77ff.), I opened a can of worms by discussing (in a satirical, critical, and not too rigorous way, as has been pointed out) the problem of 'harmful homophony'. The contents appear to be still wriggling. I was arguing against the traditional idea that there are such things as 'harmful homophones', e.g., homophone pairs whose semantic 'clash' results in referential or denotative 'problems' for speakers of the language, and which are therefore 'resolved' either by loss of one form or implementation of some special or marginal sound change so as to 'avoid' the homophony. My particular case was M.L. Samuels' (1972) post-hoc 'explanation', based on the idea of 'harmful homophonic clash', of why OE *scyttan* did not end up as etymologically expected PDE **shit* instead of *shut*. If historical development had followed the majority pattern, we should now have the converses *open* vs. *shit*. But apparently the usual /i/ from unrounded OE /y/ was 'replaced' by /u/, to 'avoid' this putative difficulty. (The excess of scare-quotes indicates my conviction that these terms are largely if not entirely meaningless.)

But the fact (as Samuels himself pointed out: 1987a) is that *scyttan* clearly *did* have the reflex *shit*, for centuries; though in his zeal to finger a scholarly failure of mine he somehow failed to see the import of this survival. Since my original argument and the polemical exchange seven years on between me and

¹ I am grateful to Ana Deumert and Laura Wright for comments on an earlier draft of this paper, in particular for agreeing with the main theoretical point, and even encouraging me to express it more strongly than I'd intended. I also owe a great lexicographical debt to Sean Bowerman and Lisa Treffry-Goatley, who furnished me with a host of examples I'd forgotten, and a lot of new and exotic ones.

my target (Samuels 1987a, b; Lass 1987), the *shit/shut* problem has been tackled (supporting my original case) by Hans Platzer (1996) and Laura Wright (1997). The result seems to be that (a) I grossly underestimated the extent to which *shut* (judging from spellings with <i,y>) in Late Middle and Early Modern English did indeed engage in long-term homophony with *shit*; Platzer has examples from c.1330-1615, and Platzer and Wright together list some 202 occurrences. And (b) that on this and other grounds, no argument deriving the 'aberrant' vocalism of *shut* from an 'attempt to avoid harmful homophony' (in this case with a 'taboo' word) has any real substance.

In this brief addition to the pile I want to extend the data base to a different but related kind of material, and make a general methodological point on the feebleness of invoking so-called 'avoidance' strategies in attempting to account for historical change (or the lack of it). The argument hinges on the fact that English (like most or all natural languages) is so full of what could be construed as 'harmful homophones' that bother nobody and persist for centuries, that the logic of any case for avoidance in a particular instance must by definition be flawed (see §3).

Since normal speakers (as opposed to linguists) do not know the histories of their languages, and therefore the etymologies of particular words, there is a problem in distinguishing two apparently identical but historically different kinds of 'homophonic clash'. Harmful Homophony (henceforth HH), the main topic of discussion in the literature, is the result of merger: two formerly separate lexemes become homophones due to an independent sound change that just happens, in relatively Neogrammarian fashion,² to wrongfoot one of them. Thus normal unrounding of OE /y(:)/ produces general merger with /i(:)/ (as in *hide* 'measure of land area' < *hīd* < *hīgid*, distantly cognate with L *cūis*; and *hide* < 'conceal' < *hȳdan*, cognate with Gr *keúthein* 'conceal'). This one apparently neither causes nor ever has caused any 'problems', unlike the same thing in (earlier) *shit* 'shut' *scyttan* and *shit* 'shit' from one of the old zero-grade forms of class I *scītan* (pp *sciten*, or deverbal noun *scite*).

There is however another (*ex hypothesi*) 'harmful' and quite common kind of sound-identity, resulting from a diametrically opposite historical trajectory: I will call it 'Harmful Polysemy' (HP). In such a case (e.g., *Dick* 'hypocoristic of Richard' and *dick* 'penis'), the homophony is in fact lexical identity, but with some kind of metaphorical, metonymic or other extension of sense leading to the coexistence of non-taboo and taboo (or at least insalubrious) senses for the same item. Since as I said above the normal speaker is innocent of etymo-

² I say 'relatively Neogrammarian' because there are cases where sporadic (i.e. non-diffused) minor changes result in homophony as well: the most notorious is US and West Country *ass* 'posterior' (OE *ears*) and general English 'type of equid' (OE *assa*). The 'taboo' form shows unexpected early /r/-deletion and failure of 17th-century lengthening before voiceless fricatives; the 'equid' word also fails to lengthen (cf. lengthened *pass*, *grass*, etc.). The only one of the trio that comes out as expected is *arse*.

logical knowledge, the two 'problems' should in principle be identical. Any prediction that holds for HH should hold for HP as well, or the concepts have no empirical substance. I return to this later.

The bulk of the data here then will not be quite the kind usually adduced either in favour of or against the 'theory' (it barely deserves the name: see §3) of homophonic clash. The main topic will not be etymological convergence (HH proper) like *shit/shut* (though there will be a case or two), but rather the (commoner) HP, which can be simply defined as the development in some lexeme or phrase of new meanings (usually sexual or scatological). The critical question for both HH and HP will be whether or not these secondary developments have any marked or even detectable effect on the usage or stability of the primary forms undergoing them.

I will not, tempting as it is, discuss the eminently discussable point of whether 'taboo' is even a relevant category for at least most younger speakers of English, though this may ultimately be significant. My impression is that permissiveness and relaxation of register boundaries have grown to such an extent in the past few decades that the concept, at least for the educated, may have lost a good deal of its power. But still, as we will see, many of the HP and HH examples have had a vigorous life measurable in centuries.

2. Ludus

Now into the arena. This section contains a (not exhaustive) list of terms that are either in the active vocabularies of the majority of English speakers, in both taboo and non-taboo senses, or the same but regionally restricted. The forms come essentially from a memory-scan; they are all ones I have used, seen, or heard. I group the items in question by rough semantic fields. Dates in brackets represent the first recorded obscene uses I have been able to find: my main sources are Partridge (1970; marked P), and the OED. Where no dates are given I have been unable to dig out any. Where it seems useful I will add glosses for regional, rare or specialized terms, and other pertinent information, including regional restriction and either taboo or non-taboo uses that may be unfamiliar to some readers.

(1) Male genitalia and related

(a) PENIS (tumescent or not): (i) Onomastic: *dick* (P, c. 1860); *John Thomas* (P, c. 1840, given wider currency in this century by D.H. Lawrence); *percy* (Aus); *peter* (P, late 19th c.); *willy/willie* (P, orig. 'child's penis', 1905; UK); *wang, wong* (US: common Chinese-American surnames); (ii) Non-Onomastic:³

³ I have no idea why the penis seems to be given personal names more often than any other appurtenance, or why it has so many more synonyms. Aside from the data here there is an extraordinary wealth of non-HH,

banger (UK 'sausage', *bury the banger* 'copulate'); *cock* (P, 1618: despite a hoary tradition to the contrary, repeated in Samuels (1987a), this is still used in the US to mean 'rooster', and in *cock pheasant*, etc., (*stop-/ball-*) *cock*); *dong* (cf. (*ding-*), Edward Lear's *Dong with the luminous nose*); *bishop*⁴ (US *beat the bishop* 'masturbate'); *knob* 'glans penis' (P: or the entire object: late 19th c.); *length* (NE Yorkshire *slip s.o. a length* 'fuck'); *lunchbox* (SA gay slang); *meat* (P, 16th c.; also for what Partridge coyly calls 'the female pudend');⁵ *member*; *old man*; *pecker* (P, 19th c. UK; now US);⁶ *prick* (P, 1592); *prong*; *pork*; *pud* (UK 'pudding, dessert'); *python* (Zimbabwean *siphon the python* 'urinate'); *rod*; *salami* (*hidelbury*) *the salami* 'copulate'); *tackle* (as in *fishing tackle*: often = entire apparatus); *tool* (P, 16th c.); *weapon* (P, 19th c.); *wick* (as in *to get on s.o.'s wick* 'irritate', *dip one's wick* 'copulate'); *winkie* (as in *Wee Willie Winkie*); *winkle* (cf. *winkle* 'periwinkle' (the snail), *winkle-picker* 'excessively pointed shoe'); *weenie* (non-taboo UK 'tiny', P, 1790; US 'frankfurter, hot dog' *Wiener* (*sausage*); *weenie-wagg(ler)* 'flasher');⁷ *worm* (S US). Note also adjectival *well-hung* 'having large penis' (non-taboo *well-hung* of meat [q. v.] properly aged).

(b) PENIS (tumescent): *erection*; *bone* (US); *boner* (US; non-taboo 'howler, mistake'); *horn* (P, 18th c.); *stiffie* (UK);⁸ *wood* (US).

non-HP terms, including such arcane delights as *trouser-ferret* (mainly N England, probably connected with the macho game of seeing how long you can keep a live ferret in your trousers without screaming or letting it out), *one-eyed ferret*, *trouser-snake*, *plonker*, *donger*, *donicker*, *dork*, *schlong* (US Yi *šlang* 'snake'), *shvants* (US Yi *švants* 'tail', cf. G *Schwantz*), *one-eyed worm*. The female equivalents seem much more poorly represented; the only non-H examples that come readily to mind are *cunt* and *twat*. I thought originally that this might be simple gender bias based on lack of experience through a different kind of socialization; but a number of female informants suggest that this is not the case, and Lisa Treffry-Goatley (personal communication) points out another asymmetry: there are apparently in her lexicon, as in mine, "considerably more pejorative terms for women than for men".

⁴ According to Partridge (s.v. *bishop*), earlier (now archaic) senses include 'chamber-pot', 'condom', and (perhaps suggestive in this case) "at Winchester College, c. 1820-1900, the sapling that binds a large faggot together".

⁵ Considering his lemmata, Partridge often shows a rather peculiar archness in his glosses. While he is happy to lemmatize *cunt*, *shit* and the like, *vagina* is apparently too much, and the above and *pudendum muliebre* seem to be the main choices, as is *membrum virile* for the other sex (though occasionally *the penis* is allowed).

⁶ This leads to a typical American/British misunderstanding when one of the latter uses the exhortation *keep your pecker up* 'keep your chin up, be of good cheer', which to an American not in the know can only mean 'sustain an erection'.

⁷ I can date this term at least to the middle years of World War II, in a child's parody of 'Whistle while you work' from Disney's *Snow White* (1937/1938): 'Whistle while you work./Hitler is a jerk./Mussolini/Pulled his weenie/But it wouldn't work.'

⁸ This is a (potential) matter of HP only in British-speaking areas, where it 'clashes' with *stiffie* '(non-floppy) computer disk'. This term was of course invented in the US, where the more rampant sense of *stiffie* does not exist.

(b) TESTICLES: *balls* (OED, sense 15b, 1325); *cobblers* (UK rhyming slang: *cobbler's awls*); *cod* 'scrotum' (P, archaic, but still in use in 20th c.; in Old English, Middle English also 'pod' as well); *knackers* (P, UK, 19th c.); *nuts* (P, 18th c.); *rocks* (esp. in *get one's rocks off* 'have orgasm').

(c) SEMEN: *come*; *cream*;⁹ *scum* (US: cf. *scumbag* 'condom', now weakened for many speakers to a synonym of *greasebag/-ball*, *hairbag/ball*, *scuzball* 'worthless, rotten person'); *spunk* (P, 19th c.).

(2) Female genitalia

(i) Onomastic: *fanny* (P, UK: c. 1860; now S Hemisphere Englishes as well);¹⁰
 (ii) Non-Onomastic: *beaver*; *box*; *bush* (P, from 19th c. mainly 'female public hair', but now entire apparatus as well); *cookie* (US: 'biscuit'); *muff* (P, 17th c.); *pussy* (P, 17th c.); *slit* (P, 17th c.); *snatch* (P, 19th c., probably originally 'quickie').¹¹ Also *cherry* 'hymen' (as adjective = 'virgin(al)', also used of men (*bust one's cherry* 'lose one's virginity')).

(3) Female breasts

boob ('harmless' sense 'error, mistake'; P *boobies* c. 1920); *bub* (US: cf. *Bub* 'term of address for person whose name is not known', like *Bud(dy)*, *Mac*); *cleavage* 'extent of divided breasts shown through female garment' (non-taboo usage in *cleavage of ovum* 'early cell-division', etc.); *headlight* (US); *knocker*; *tit*¹² (P, 17th c. *teat*; non-taboo *tit for tat*). Descriptive terms for women with large breasts: *stacked*, *built*.

(4) Woman (usually) as sexual object

chick; *crumpet* (UK); *skirt*; *squeeze*; *tail* (P, 18th c.); these as well as *ass* (and non-HP terms like *cunt*, *pussy*, *twat*) are often used partitively as in 'get some X', 'piece of X', etc. Note also *dog* 'ugly or unalluring woman'.

⁹ Also 'vaginal secretion'. Like *come*, this seems to be first attested as a verb (so Partridge); it is not clear when the nominal uses arose, but one imagines they are virtually contemporaneous. Now especially common in expressions like *to cream one's jeans/knickers/oneself* (usable by both sexes, literally and figuratively).

¹⁰ Probably not related to *Fanny Adams*, as in the euphemism *sweet Fanny Adams* = *Sweet fuck-all*.

¹¹ Partridge quotes Burton, *Anatomy of melancholy*: "I could not abide marriage, but as a rambler I took a snatch when I could get it."

¹² *Tit* in the sense 'nipple' is extended further to non-taboo technical jargon, e.g. *tit* (of doorbell) = *bell push*; also used for (roughly) nipple-shaped parts in plumbing. While *tit* 'breast' may be mildly taboo in some circles, in the sense 'prat, idiot, git' it seems to be quite acceptable in British usage; and cf. *to get on s. o.'s tits* 'irritate'.

(5) *Copulation and other sexual activities*

COPULATE: (i) Onomastic, Male only: *roger* (P, 18th c.); (ii) Non-Onomastic, Male: *bang* (P, 20th c.); *dick* (cf. (1)); *knock* (P, 16th c.); *plank*; *plough*; *poke* (P, 19th c.); *pork*; *root* (Aus); *shaft* (P, late 1940s); *stuff* (P, UK, 19th c.); (iii) Unisex/Mutual: *hose*; *hump* (P, 18th c., originally category (ii)); *lay*; *ream* (also 'bugger, perform oro-anal sex on s.o.');

MASTURBATE: *jerk* (off); *toss* (off) (cf. *toss off* 'perform any activity, most often creative, quickly and easily, as to *toss off a poem*, etc.).

HAVE ORGASM: *come* (19th c.); *cream*; *drop a/one's load*.

ORAL SEX: *eat* 'perform fellatio or cunnilingus'; *gobble* 'perform fellatio';¹⁴ *lap* 'perform cunnilingus'; *rim* 'perform anilingus' (cf. P, *rim* 'to bugger (a woman)', 20th c.; may just possibly be related to *ream* [q. v.] as *tit* is to *teat*, but that's speculative); *suck*.

EJACULATE:¹⁵ *cream*; *fetch* (UK, late 19th c.); *shoot* (mid-19th c.);¹⁶ *spurt*.

'SEXUALLY EXCITED, LUSTFUL': Onomastic: *randy* (P, 1785); Non-Onomastic: *horny* (P, 19th c.); *hot*; *turned on* (also 'high on drugs').

(6) *Contraception and related*

bag (US);¹⁷ *coil*; *diaphragm*; *loop*; *prophylactic*; *sheath*.

(7) *Prostitution*

(i) Prostitutes: (a) Onomastic: *mickey* (US); *tom* (UK, apparently mainly police jargon); (b) Non-onomastic: *slag* (UK, P late 1950s; but cf. *slagger* 'brothel-keeper', 1909; non-taboo 'waste material left over from mining or smelting operation'); *tart* (P, originally a term of affection which it still is in some lects (Laura Wright, personal communication), but which in others began to pejorate

¹³ According to Partridge (s.v.) the original sense was 'to copulate with a woman'; now it is a unisex and mutual verb (as is the noun).

¹⁴ Cf. *gobble prick* (Partridge, s.v.) 'a rampant, lustful woman' (mid-18th c.).

¹⁵ *Ejaculate* is now of course pretty archaic or at least comical in the sense 'cry out'; though as Laura Wright reminds me (personal communication), given the right context it would probably go unnoticed ('Oh I say!' Angela ejaculated').

¹⁶ *Juvenilia*: Why is a panda like an inconsiderate lover? Because it eats shoots and leaves.

¹⁷ It may be relevant that in the America of my youth the two leading condom brands were *Trojan* and *Sheik* (I have no idea if they still exist); these had no effect on the persistence of the two words in ordinary discourse. The *Trojan Horse and War* and the *Sheik of Araby* were not even the material for jokes (surprisingly).

c.1880; modern restrictions c. 1904); (ii) Customers: *john*; *trick* (esp. in *to turn a trick*).

(8) *Sexually transmitted afflictions*

clap 'gonorrhoea' (P, 16th c.); *crabs* 'infestation with *Phthirus pubis*, the crab-louse' (P, c.1800); *dose* 'venereal infection' (P, c. 1860).

(9) *Fundamentalia*

(i) Onomastic: *fanny* (US);¹⁸ *prat* (= *Pratt*, P, 16th c.);¹⁹ (ii) Non-Onomastic: *ass* (P, 19th c. US, now spreading to other regions); *bottom* (P, 18th c.); *bum* (late Middle English, now UK: 'harmless' US *bum* 'vagrant', derived *bum a cigarette*; further UK *bum-boy* 'catamite, male prostitute'); *bun(s)* (US 'buttock(s)');²⁰ *butt* (15th c.); *can* (US); *pile(s)* 'haemorrhoid(s)' (late Middle English: OED s.v. *Pile sb.*⁵).

(10) *Scatologica*

URINATION: *hose* (UK, esp. *to hose oneself* from laughter); *leak* (P, c. 1590); *number one* (P, late 19th c.); *pee* (1788: homophone of *pea*, UK *p* 'pence'); *sis*, *sissy* (US; as the dictionaries say in desperate moments, 'imit.');

slash (P, 20th c.); *spend a penny* (UK, originally from public pay-toilets); *tinkle*; *wee* (Scots 'tiny'; P, shortening of *wee-wee*, 'nursery colloquial', 19th c.); *whizz*.
DEFECATION: *crap* (noun or verb; also in weakened form = 'junk'; cf. *crap-shooting* 'playing a particular game with dice', also 'talking rubbish'); *doo* (mainly US, esp. in *doggy-doo*, homophonous with *do*, and in some dialects *dew*; cf. also US *doody*, childish homophone of *duty* in dialects with fully voiced intervocalic tapped /t/; also reduplicated *doo-doo*, which though infantile may be used euphemistically by adults: I recall George Bush, during a presidential campaign, referring to someone being "in deep doo-doo" = *deep shit*); *dump* (mainly US, n., v.); *stool* (n., v. late Middle English: OED s.v.); *motion(s)* (mainly UK; OED 'faeces, bowel-movement' 1598); *number two* (see *number one* above); *poo* (cf. interj. *pooh*, *Winnie the Pooh*); *poop* (see below).

FARTING: *bomb* (US, n., v.); *poop* (18th c.; harmless in *poop (deck)*, *party-pooper*).

¹⁸ This usage can be illustrated from an American limerick of WW II vintage: 'Mussolini's pet marshall Graziani/Marched his troops into Sidi Barani;/ But Sir Archibald Wavell/ Kicked him once in the navel/ And twenty-five times in the fanny'.

¹⁹ Rarely heard now in its literal sense (except fossilized in *pratfall*); more usually *jerk*, *idiot*, *nit*.

²⁰ Perhaps quite recent. Partridge gives *bun* for female genitalia, probably a transfer from a Scots and N English term for 'hare's tail'.

TOILETS: *bog* (P, 1825); *can* (US); *head* (orig. nautical, UK, US); *john* (P, 'upper and middle class', 20th c.; now exclusively US); *privy* (OED late Middle English; cf. *Privy Council*, *privy to a secret*); *porcelain* (Aus *point Percy at the porcelain* 'urinate', *worship the porcelain god* 'vomit').

VOMITING: *heave* 'retch, vomit' (cf. *dry heaves* 'retching without vomiting'); *honk* (US); *throw up*; ²¹ *toss (up)* (cf. *it's a tossup whether X or Y*; US, usually *toss one's cookies*); *woops* (mainly US, cf. interj. *w(h)oops*).

(11) Terms (pejorative or not) for 'homosexual'

dyke 'lesbian' (spelling irrelevant: P, c. 1935); ²² *fag* (mainly US; OED 1923; UK *fag* 'cigarette'); *faggot* (US, OED, 1914); *fairy* (orig. US, OED 1895); *fruit* (orig. US; OED, 1937); *pansy* (P, c. 1930); *poof* ('interj.', in some dialects homophonous with *pouffe*; P, Aus c. 1910, UK 1932; in SA *poof* also 'dog or cat turd'); *queer*.

3. Victor Ludorum

Now that the game is played, I declare myself winner in the Harmfulness Debate, in the spirit in which the biologist Lynn Margulis describes her radical theories of the origin of nucleated cells as "an act ... of unremitting arrogance" (1993: xx). Homophony (harmful or benign) is normally indistinguishable from polysemy, except on historical grounds, or in some cases if the senses are so wildly different that speakers are unwilling to accept two forms as 'the same word', e.g. *bank* (of river) and *bank* 'financial institution'. There are a number of historical sources of homophony/polysemy: (a) accidental homophony through the operation of Neogrammarian sound change (*hide* as in §1); (b) Neogrammarian sound change along with 'sporadic' or 'minor' change (*ass* 'equid' < OE *assa* vs. *ass* 'arse' < OE *ears*); and (c), perhaps the most important, extension of the sense of an already existing lexeme, with no phonological involvement. Such extensions may be metaphorical (e.g. *pussy*, *balls*, *hump*); they may involve tropes like metonymy (*heave*, *stool*); or they may be apparently arbitrary, almost like coinage *ex nihilo* from the semantic point of view, but using existing word-shapes (*dick*, *peter*, *fanny*). The point is that just about any 'ordinary', non-taboo word may (and often does) develop senses that fall into taboo fields like the sexual or excretory. And once it does, the derived sense/form complex, along with the original source, amounts descriptively to

²¹ Cf. earlier (and sometimes current) sense 'to reproach s.o. with s.t.'

²² Note that even the availability (and frequent use) of punning opportunities by the juvenile(-minded) seems to have no effect. Two playground inanities from my youth: 'The little Dutch boy put his finger in the /daik/'; 'On Good Friday Jesus rode into Jerusalem on his ass.'

'homophonic clash'. But in most cases neither the offending object nor the extended sense(s) disappear; the wide range of usages (cf. *prick*) may remain for centuries. Even though Shakespeare could pun on the two senses of *prick* (*Mercutio* in *Romeo and Juliet* II.iv.118ff.: "the bawdy hand of the dial is now upon the prick of noon"), three centuries later we can still prick our fingers with a needle and dogs can prick up their ears without embarrassment.²³

So extension of sense, though not usually considered as a major source of homophones, does in fact create them, and nobody seems to avoid using the words in their original senses. This is simply another argument (if indeed any were needed: cf. Lass 1997: ch. 7) against the circular notion that a language state can be 'harmful' to its speakers, when the only evidence for its harmfulness is the few cases in which if something hadn't happened there would be harm. And when (actually quite rarely), the expected thing happens, then of course it did because the item in question was 'harmful', otherwise it wouldn't have.²⁴

This comes very close to (and usually achieves) the elementary logical fallacy of *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*, a pretty elementary mistake to serve as a standard explanatory strategy. The conceptual framework is set up in such a way that any positive instance is a viable example, and no negative instance is a counterexample. This would seem (to the rational) to disable the notion of 'harm' (like virtually all other functional or teleological motivations for linguistic change), and reduce it to a wishful-thinking pseudo-explanation.

To sum it up, if 'homophonic clash' were a theory rather than a wish-fulfilment of functionalists, it ought to make predictions (at least to some quantifiable level of statistical significance, if not absolutely). After all, the way you test a theory is by deriving predictions, and testing them against empirical evidence. And certainly given the theory (going all the way back to Gallo-Romance roosters and cats), one reasonable prediction that could be derived is as follows:

If a non-taboo word develops very commonly used taboo senses, the word itself ought (very likely) to become taboo, or the taboo senses ought to disappear, since there is harmful homophony. (This is the simple inverse of etymological convergence.)

²³ Though note the amusing distinction between two versions of *prick up your ears*: one with an intonational fall after *prick* and a high fall on *up*, the other with a single falling contour over the whole phrase. (I owe this example to John Trim.)

²⁴ For an interesting case where 'avoidance' seems actually to have occurred, and is guided by an 'invisible hand', see the discussion of the substitution in German of older *englisch* 'angelic' by *engelhaft*, apparently related to the increasing focality of English in Germany (Keller 1990). An incipient example may be the gradual supercession of *gay* in its original senses by the sense 'homosexual'. Though (Laura Wright, personal communication) notes that *gaily*, *gaiety girls/theatre*, *gay abandon* are still unproblematic. If indeed *englisch* and perhaps in time to come *gay* are genuine examples of 'functionally motivated homophone avoidance', they are the exception rather than the rule.

The old chestnuts about the replacement of *cock* by *rooster* and *ass* by *donkey* (which are only partly true: see Lass 1987) may be examples in fact; but they are not convincing, since neither the words themselves nor the polysemy have vanished.

But the real reason for the exiguous success of 'avoidance' or 'clash' theory (aside from its logical ill-formedness and immunity to falsification) is that it misconstrues the nature of the arena in which such things are claimed to happen. It is simply bad linguistics, because it claims to be a speech-based (rather than 'structural') phenomenon, but in fact totally ignores the multi-level complexity of discourse in natural languages. The idea of 'avoidance' derives entirely from atomistic pairwise comparisons, without reference to pragmatic or discourse factors, and totally disregards the rich texture of normal speech, which is generally polysemous and densely metaphorical. I wouldn't be surprised (though I have no statistics) if at least some degree of polysemy were more common than univocality. Great numbers of words arise not from either coinage (relatively rare) or use of productive derivational processes (including conversion), but rather from polysemization, adding metaphoric, metonymic and other senses to primary ones. We talk in tropes, and this lends the language system as a whole, in use, a flexibility that disables 'harm'. Under normal circumstances it's pretty clear whether a given token of *muff* refers to a vagina or an object for keeping extremities warm.

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