Title ‘That’s so gay’: A contemporary use of *gay* in Australian English

Authors	Thérèse Lalor Johanna Rendle-Short
Institutional Affiliation	Thérèse Lalor, Australian National University Johanna Rendle-Short, Australian National University
Email addresses	thereselalor@hotmail.com Johanna.Rendle-Short@anu.edu.au
Postal Address	Johanna Rendle-Short Linguistics and Applied Linguistics School of Language Studies The Australian National University Canberra, ACT 0200, Australia

Thérèse Lalor graduated from the Australian National University in 2005, where she majored in both Psychology and Linguistics. She is now working for the Australian Bureau of Statistics in Canberra, where she works on the design, development and testing of survey forms. She is interested in the interaction between language and society, and in particular, in semantic change focussing on the way in which new words and meanings are introduced into contemporary language.

Johanna Rendle-Short is senior lecturer in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics at the Australian National University. Her main research interest is conversation analysis, talk-in-interaction, and embodied discourse. She is the author of *The Academic Presentation: Situated Talk in Action*, in the *Directions in Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis Series* (Ashgate, 2006). More recently she has been analysing the use of address terms in the Australian political news interview, as well as analysing the interaction of children with communication disorders.

Title

'That's so gay': A contemporary use of *gay* in Australian English

Abstract

Recently, a different usage of the word *gay* has appeared in Australian English. In addition to the earlier meaning of *gay* being 'happy', 'carefree' and 'frivolous' (1st meaning), and to a later meaning of *gay* being synonymous with 'homosexual' (2nd meaning), it appears that *gay* is now being understood by young people to mean 'stupid', 'lame' or 'boring', as in 'That shirt is so gay', or 'How gay is that?' (3rd meaning). Two studies were performed to ascertain who is aware of this new meaning of *gay* within contemporary Australian society (Study 1) and to examine the 3rd meaning in more detail, by focussing on how young people from Canberra (Australia), aged 18 – 30, currently understand the word *gay* (Study 2). The results of Study 1 showed that the word *gay* functions as a sociolinguistic variable with older people (60+) being more likely to interpret *gay* as having the 1st meaning, whereas younger people (18 – 30 year olds) were more likely to interpret *gay* as having the 3rd meaning. The results of Study 2 showed that young people (18 - 30 year olds) understand the meaning of *gay* differently depending upon whether the subject is animate (e.g. 'he', 'she') or inanimate (e.g. 'that film'); whether it is used with the verb 'to look' or the copula 'to be'; and whether the word *gay* is used in conjunction with the intensifier *so* (e.g. 'They're gay' compared to 'They're so gay'). *Gay* was more likely to be interpreted in the negative 3rd meaning in sentences with an inanimate subject. Studying this new meaning of the word *gay* is important for understanding semantic change and discovering current language trends in contemporary Australian English.

Keywords *gay*, homosexual, intensifiers, *so*, sociolinguistics, Australian English

1. Introduction¹

The following statement from prime time television, clearly articulated by a woman of about 70 years of age, sounded odd and out of place:

'Australians are outspoken and gay and things like that.'
(ABC TV, *7.30 Report*, September, 2005)

Such a statement that incorporates the notion of *gay* meaning 'happy', 'bright' or 'full of fun' is in direct contrast with the way in which young people appear to use the word *gay* within the current sociolinguistic climate. As well as *gay* being used to refer to someone who is homosexual, the word has also taken on another negative connotation, indicating that something (or someone) is 'stupid', 'bad', 'lame' or 'pathetic'. Examples (1) - (4) demonstrate the sorts of ways in which *gay* is currently being used:

- (1) 'That shirt is so gay.'
- (2) 'How gay is that?'
- (3) 'That was a gay question.'
- (4) 'He's wearing a Superman hat. He's so gay.'

¹ The authors would like to thank Louise Skelt, Tanya Britten and two anonymous reviewers for insightful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

It is clear, therefore, that the word *gay* is polysemous, with *gay* meaning 'happy', 'bright' or 'full of fun' (1st meaning); *gay* meaning 'homosexual' (2nd meaning); and *gay* meaning 'stupid', 'bad', 'lame' or 'pathetic' (3rd meaning). Two studies were performed to ascertain who is aware of this new meaning of *gay* within contemporary Australian society (Study 1) and to examine this new 3rd meaning in more detail, by focussing on how young people from Canberra, aged 18 – 30 currently interpret the word *gay* (Study 2).

2. Historical overview of the word *gay*

The word *gay* was originally borrowed from French in the fourteenth century and used to mean 'merry', 'jolly' or 'light hearted' (Leith 1997:76). However, by the seventeenth century, the word had gone through its first semantic change. Through the process of pejoration (Pyles & Algeo, 1993), the word took on more negative associations, and the 'light hearted' meaning of *gay* came to be interpreted as 'frivolity', 'lack of seriousness' or even 'hedonism' (Leith, 1997:76). From this, the meaning of 'being addicted to social pleasures' developed and *gay* became a euphemism for people who lived immoral and wasteful lives (Leith, 1997:76). *Gay* was also used as slang to refer to prostitutes and was sometimes extended to mean male homosexual prostitutes and male homosexuals (Butters, 1998).

Thus, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the word *gay* had both a positive and a slightly negative meaning in that it meant that one was 'happy', 'carefree' or 'colourful', but it also carried the meaning of being 'frivolous' or 'hedonistic'. If one said that they had attended 'a gay party', they meant that it was 'a happy, carefree, colourful, frivolous and hedonistic party'. In addition, this type of party would be one that stereotypical homosexual men would attend, as they were seen as being stereotypically carefree, frivolous and hedonistic (Butters, 1998).

It is this hedonistic meaning of *gay* that appears to be responsible for further semantic change of the word. During the early twentieth century, the word was adopted by the homosexual community and there was a push for the term to be accepted as a standard term of reference for homosexuals (Leith, 1997:76). Such a shift is referred to semantically as metonymy, whereby the target domain, in this case the new meaning of *gay*, is partially understood in terms of the source meaning (Barcelona, 2000:4; Pyles & Algeo, 1993). In other words, 'homosexuals are gay, therefore, gay means homosexual' (Butters, 1998:189). This semantic shift resulted in polysemous use of the word *gay*, such that by the end of the first half of the twentieth century, there were two meanings of the word *gay* (Meyerhoff, 2006:55).

This second usage of *gay* meaning 'homosexual' is now part of standard Australian English. Both the Australian Oxford Dictionary (1999) and the Macquarie Dictionary (2005) give this meaning as its primary meaning. Earlier associations with prostitution seem to have been forgotten (Leith, 1997:76). The wide usage of *gay* with a homosexual meaning is due, in large part, to the fact that most homosexual men prefer to be called *gay*, with the term referring more to cultural and social aspects of homosexuality than sexual practice (Baker, 2005). This makes sense when one considers how the semantic change came about. It is also reflected in the fact that the term *gay* predominantly references men who identify as homosexual, although it can also refer to both lesbians and gay men when referring to 'the gay community'. Discussions abound within the gay community as to which term is preferred (e.g. 'gay',

‘homosexual’ or the more pejorative term ‘gays’), and as to how such terms should be used (e.g. Baker, 2005). One of the few studies into the use of the term in Australian English (Curnow, 2002) even demonstrates the way in which the conjunct ‘gay and lesbian’ has become lexicalized as a collective noun rather than two conjoined nouns.

While many people in the older generation would have used the ‘happy’ and ‘carefree’ meaning of *gay*, this 1st meaning appears to be slowly disappearing. It has been argued that as people have become aware of the homosexual meaning of *gay*, they avoid using the term *gay* when they want to express feelings of happiness (Crowley, 1997:154). However, this is not to say that the ‘happy’ and ‘carefree’ meaning is still not heard today, as the quote at the beginning of the article indicates. Anecdotal evidence from people who are 60 and over, indicates that they still prefer the older ‘happy’ and ‘carefree’ meaning, and avoid the more modern homosexual meaning of *gay*. It should also be noted that although some people might still consider *gay* to be a derogatory epithet, in many circles it is considered a positive or neutral term (Meyerhoff, 2006:56).

3. New usage of ‘gay’

In recent years, a new usage of *gay* has appeared. In this new usage, *gay* means ‘stupid’, ‘boring’ or ‘lame’, as in ‘That’s so gay’. Both the Macquarie Dictionary (2005) and the 2nd edition of the Australian Oxford English Dictionary (2004) have entries detailing this more recent usage of *gay*. The term seems to be predominantly used by the young, either schoolchildren, according to the Macquarie Dictionary (2005), or teenagers, according to the Australian Oxford Dictionary (2004). According to the Historical Dictionary of American Slang (Lighter, 1994), it first appeared in 1978 in America. In Australia, however, the term seems to be a more recent addition, with anecdotal evidence suggesting that it was introduced to Australia in the late 90’s through the television program ‘South Park’ (SBS).¹

Very little research has been carried out into the more recent use of the term *gay* meaning ‘stupid’ or ‘lame’.² The aim of the current research was to examine people’s understanding of this term in contemporary Australian society, by focussing on the following issues.

1. Are people of different ages aware of all three meanings of *gay*?
2. Do men and women understand the new usage (3rd meaning) differently?
3. Does the meaning of *gay* change according to the context of the statement?
4. Does the meaning change when modified by the intensifier *so*? (for example, ‘That’s gay’ compared to ‘That’s so gay’)

We will now report on two studies on the use of *gay* in contemporary Australian society.

4. Study 1

The aim of this study was to understand current usage of the word *gay*. In particular, we were interested in testing the following hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 1: Younger people are more aware of the new meaning of *gay* than older people.
- Hypothesis 2: Men and women interpret the meaning of *gay* in different ways.

4.1. Method

4.1.1. Participants

This study was a 3 (age: 18 -30, 31 -50, 51 -70) x 2 (gender: male, female) factorial between subjects design. One hundred and eleven participants (53 men and 58 women) participated in the study. The participants were drawn from a variety of settings, including the Australian National University, the public service and the researcher's neighbourhood. All participants were living in Canberra. All participants were native speakers of Australian English.³

4.1.2. Materials and Procedures

Participants were given a two-page questionnaire, consisting of 20 statements, each with the word *gay* in them (Appendix A). The statements were taken from an online discussion of the new usage of *gay*,⁴ and were worded in such a way that some of the statements could be interpreted as having two or three different meanings. Participants were asked to provide synonyms for *gay* in each statement. They were given no guidance as to what the synonyms might be. Participants were informed that if they were not able to give a synonym, they should write 'don't know'.

4.2. Results

There were four categories of meanings: *gay* with a 'happy' or 'carefree' meaning; *gay* with a homosexual meaning; *gay* with some sort of 'negative' meaning; and a 'don't know' response. The negative meaning was expressed in a variety of ways, including, 'lame', 'bad', 'pathetic', 'boring', 'weird', 'different', 'strange'. We identified this as the 3rd meaning.

The frequency of each response across all the participants is shown in Figure 1. The graph indicates that the 3rd meaning was the most frequent response (54.86%). The next most frequent response was the 'happy' (18.38%), followed by 'homosexual' (14.05%) and then 'don't know' (12.70%).

Figure 1 Total responses from Study 1

Age Variable. The data indicates that there was an age difference in terms of the 3rd negative meaning, with the older age group being less likely to provide a negative meaning for the word *gay*. Figure 2 shows that 233 (47.55%) participants aged 18 – 30 provided a negative meaning of *gay*, compared to 170 (34.69%) participants aged 31 – 50, and 87 (17.76%) participants aged 51 – 70. Thus, of all the age groups, the oldest

age group was least aware of the negative meaning. Hypothesis 1, that younger people are more aware of the 3rd negative meaning than older people, is supported.

Figure 2. Number of 'negative' responses broken up by age group

Gender Variable. The data shows that there appears to be a slight gender difference in terms of an understanding of the 3rd negative meaning. Figure 3 shows that 222 (45.31%) men and 268 (54.69%) women interpreted the meaning of *gay* in a negative sense. Thus, women were slightly more likely to interpret the statements with *gay* as having a 3rd negative meaning.

Figure 3. Number of 'negative' responses broken up by gender

In terms of the 2nd homosexual meaning, Figure 4 shows that there seems to be an opposite difference in terms of the way in which men and women interpret statements with *gay*, with 117 (56.52%) men interpreting *gay* in its 2nd meaning of homosexual compared to 90 (43.48%) women who interpreted *gay* in the homosexual sense.

Figure 4. Number of 'homosexual' responses broken up by gender

In summary, Study 1 examined the use of *gay* in Australian English. The results of the study supported Hypothesis 1, that younger people were more aware of the 3rd meaning of *gay* than older people. The results also supported Hypothesis 2, that men and women interpreted the meaning of *gay* in different ways, with women being slightly more likely to interpret *gay* as having a negative meaning, and men being slightly more likely to interpret *gay* as having a homosexual meaning.

5. Study 2

A number of issues arose out of Study 1. First, when asked to indicate the meaning of *gay* in the different statements, some of the synonyms used to describe the 3rd meaning of *gay* encompassed the notion of 'bad' or 'lame' as well as the slightly different notion of 'weird', 'different', 'strange' or 'unconventional'. This raised the possibility that although there was clearly a 3rd meaning of *gay* that did not include the idea of homosexuality, it might be that there were two different concepts within this 3rd meaning. In other words, there might be an additional 4th meaning of *gay*. Second, following the completion of the first study, a number of respondents stated that they were unable to provide a precise meaning for *gay* because they had not been provided with sufficient contextual information. In particular, they stated that they had difficulty discriminating between *gay* being used in its 2nd homosexual meaning and *gay* being used in its negative 3rd meaning.

As a result, a second study (Study 2) was performed, focusing on the younger age group (18 – 30 year olds) who clearly indicated that they were aware of the 3rd negative meaning of *gay* in order to find out in more detail how *gay* is currently understood in Australian English. The aim of Study 2 was to ascertain whether there was an additional 4th meaning of *gay* as 'weird' or 'strange'. More specifically, Study 2 focussed on whether the meaning, or interpretation of the meaning, of *gay* varied according to context. The contexts to be examined were: whether the meaning of *gay* was affected by its occurrence with the verb 'to be' or the verb 'look', or by the animacy of the subject (e.g. an inanimate 'shirt' compared to a male/female agent); and whether the presence of the intensifier *so* would affect the perceived meaning of *gay* within all these different contexts. We proposed two additional hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3: The perceived meaning of *gay* varies according to context.

Hypothesis 4: The perceived meaning of *gay* varies according to whether it is used in conjunction with the intensifier *so*.

5.1. Method

5.1.1. Participants

This study was a 2 (Intensifier: +/- *so*) x 6 (Context: the verb 'to be', the verb 'look', inanimate nouns, masculine subject, feminine subject, plural subject) factorial mixed design. One hundred and sixty-four participants were involved in the study. In total, 60 men and 104 women were surveyed. All the participants for this study were Australian National University students aged between 18 and 30 years and were drawn from a variety of subject areas including history, psychology and linguistics. As in Study 1, all participants were living in Canberra and all were native speakers of Australian English.

5.1.2. Materials and Procedures

The one-page questionnaire consisted of 11 statements containing the word *gay* (Appendix B). The Context variable was operationalized through the 11 statements, with each statement including one or more of the following: the verb 'to be'; the verb 'look'; an inanimate noun (e.g. 'shirt', 'class'); or the animate agent ('he', 'she'). There were two versions of the questionnaire. Both versions of the questionnaire included the same 11 statements. In Version 2, however, the intensifier⁵ *so* was placed before *gay* in each statement. Participants were randomly given either Version 1 or Version 2.

Participants were asked to read each statement and to use the category that appeared at the top of the questionnaire to indicate what they thought *gay* meant in each statement (Statements 1-11). The categories consisted of 4 different possible meanings of *gay* together with a 'don't know' option. The four categories were the 'happy' 1st meaning, the homosexual 2nd meaning, the 'bad' or 'lame' 3rd meaning, and the possible 4th 'weird' or 'strange' meaning. Participants were also asked to indicate which of the meanings of *gay* listed at the top of the questionnaire they themselves used (Question 12). They were further asked to specify when and with whom they used the various meanings of *gay*. Demographic details were also obtained (Questions 13-16).⁶

5.2. Results

Although following Study 1 it was thought that there may be a possible 4th meaning of *gay* meaning 'weird' or 'strange', category 4 did not emerge as a separate category, at least within the context of the given statements. Lack of clear evidence for the 4th category emerged because 44 participants (26.8%) wrote 3 or 4 against at least one of the given statements. In addition, some participants discussed the problem of distinguishing between meaning 3 and 4 with the researcher as they filled out the questionnaire. Finally, participants also reflected the difficulty of making a clear distinction in that, in their written comments, category 3 and 4 were often clumped together showing a 'negative', 'derogatory', 'not good' or 'offensive' meaning. Some participants specifically indicated the similarity of the two ideas, as in '3/4 are quite similar usually (weird is often bad)'. As a result, categories 3 and 4 were combined into an overall 3rd negative meaning.⁷

Results showed that the most commonly used meanings of *gay* were the 2nd homosexual and (overall) 3rd negative meaning. In response to Question 12 that asked participants which of the uses of *gay* they themselves actually used, the majority of participants

(51.38%) indicated that they used both of these meanings, with 26.52 % indicating they only used the homosexual meaning and only 10.50 % indicating they only used the negative 3rd meaning (Table 1). About three percent of participants did not indicate their usage. The remaining 8.84% indicated that they used a combination of the 1st ‘happy’ meaning and other meanings of *gay*. As shown in Table 1, there was very little gender difference, with both male and female participants predominantly using the 2nd and (overall) 3rd meanings.

Table 1 Breakdown of use of *gay* by male and female participants

	Men	Women	Total
Only use 2 nd meaning	23.33 %	28.10 %	26.52 %
Only use (overall) 3 rd meaning	5.00 %	13.22 %	10.50 %
Use both 2 nd and (overall) 3 rd meaning	55.00 %	49.59 %	51.38 %
Use combinations, including 1 st meaning	8.33 %	9.09 %	8.84 %
Did not indicate usage	8.33 %	0.00 %	2.76 %
	100%	100%	100%

Context Variable. The results show that the meaning of *gay* varies according to the animacy of the subject. When the subject was inanimate, as in ‘That film was gay’, ‘This party is gay’, ‘That shirt is gay’, ‘That class was gay’, or ‘That’s gay’ (statements 2, 4, 7, 9, 11 of Version 1 of the questionnaire), responses showed that the word *gay* was interpreted as having the (overall) 3rd negative meaning of ‘bad’ or ‘lame’ 86.19% of the time (Table 2). 2.14% of responses indicated that participants interpreted *gay* as meaning ‘happy’, and 6.19% of responses indicated that participants interpreted *gay* as meaning homosexual. (This latter group presumably interpreted sentences such as ‘That class is so gay’ as meaning that there were a lot of homosexual people in the class.) 4.76% of participants gave multiple responses.⁸

Table 2 Frequencies of perceived meaning of *gay* with inanimate subject (Version 1)

Intensifier <i>so</i> absent (Version 1)		
Category	No. of Responses	%
1	9	2.14 %
2	26	6.19 %
3 & 4	362	86.19 %
5	3	0.72 %
6	20	4.76 %
TOTAL	420	100 %

Category 1: happy, bright, light hearted, cheerful, fun

Category 2: homosexual, camp, effeminate, stereotypical homosexual traits

Category 3: bad, lame, pathetic, stupid, boring

Category 4: weird, different, strange, unconventional

Category 5: don’t know

Category 6: multiple responses given

However, when the subject was animate, as in ‘he’ or ‘she’ (statements 3, 5, 8, 10 of Version 1 of the questionnaire), the picture was completely different (Table 3).

Responses indicated that participants no longer overwhelmingly assumed that the word *gay* meant ‘bad’ or ‘lame’. Instead, only 32.44% of responses indicated that the meaning of *gay* in sentences with an animate subject was interpreted in this 3rd negative sense (compared to 86.19% when the subject was inanimate). Most responses (44.34%) showed that when *gay* was modified by an animate subject, it was interpreted as taking on the 2nd homosexual meaning (Table 3).

Table 3 Frequencies of perceived meaning of *gay* with animate subject (Version 1)

Intensifier <i>so</i> absent (Version 1)		
Category	No. of Responses	%
1	17	5.06 %
2	149	44.34 %
3 & 4	109	32.44 %
5	10	2.98 %
6	51	15.18 %
TOTAL	336	100 %

Category 1: happy, bright, light hearted, cheerful, fun

Category 2: homosexual, camp, effeminate, stereotypical homosexual traits

Category 3: bad, lame, pathetic, stupid, boring

Category 4: weird, different, strange, unconventional

Category 5: don't know

Category 6: multiple responses given

In addition, there was greater variability in interpreting the meaning of *gay* in sentences with an animate subject. In sentences with an inanimate subject, participants only gave multiple responses 4.76% of the time (Table 2), whereas when the subject was animate, participants gave multiple responses 15.18% of the time (Table 3). In other words, when used with an animate subject, there was greater variability in terms of how the meaning of *gay* was interpreted in the various contexts.

Intensifier Variable. When the intensifier *so* was used in sentences with an inanimate subject (statements 2, 4, 7, 9, 11 of Version 2 of the questionnaire), the percentage of responses indicating that the word *gay* took the (overall) 3rd negative meaning stayed virtually the same: 86.19% (Table 2) compared to 89.50% (Table 4). However, responses that indicated an interpretation of *gay* as homosexual (2nd meaning) decreased from 6.19% (Table 2) to 3.50% (Table 4). The percentage that did not know (category 5) the meaning of *gay* in this context doubled from 0.72% (Table 2) to 1.50% (Table 4) and the percentage that gave multiple meanings of *gay* also decreased slightly from 4.76% (Table 2) to 4.25% (Table 4).

Table 4 Frequencies of perceived meaning of *so gay* with inanimate subject (Version 2)

Intensifier <i>so</i> present (Version 2)		
Category	No. of Responses	%
1	5	1.25 %

2	14	3.50 %
3 & 4	358	89.50 %
5	6	1.50 %
6	17	4.25 %
TOTAL	400	100 %

Category 1: happy, bright, light hearted, cheerful, fun

Category 2: homosexual, camp, effeminate, stereotypical homosexual traits

Category 3: bad, lame, pathetic, stupid, boring

Category 4: weird, different, strange, unconventional

Category 5: don't know

Category 6: multiple responses given

In contrast, when the intensifier *so* was used in sentences with an animate subject (statements 3, 5, 8, 10 of Version 2 of the questionnaire), the percentage of responses indicating that the word *gay* took the 3rd negative meaning decreased markedly from 32.44% (Table 3) to 18.44% (Table 5), and responses that indicated that such sentences took the 2nd homosexual meaning increased markedly from 44.34% (Table 3) to 64.06% (Table 5).

Table 5 Frequencies of perceived meaning of *so gay* with animate subject (Version 2)

Intensifier <i>so</i> present (Version 2)		
Category	No. of Responses	%
1	6	1.88 %
2	205	64.06 %
3 & 4	59	18.44 %
5	9	2.81 %
6	41	12.81%
TOTAL	320	100 %

Category 1: happy, bright, light hearted, cheerful, fun

Category 2: homosexual, camp, effeminate, stereotypical homosexual traits

Category 3: bad, lame, pathetic, stupid, boring

Category 4: weird, different, strange, unconventional

Category 5: don't know

Category 6: multiple responses given

Once again, 12.81% (Table 5) of participants gave multiple responses indicating some variability in terms of how to interpret *gay* when used with an animate subject, such as 'he' or 'she'.

Gender variable. The following tables (Tables 6 and 7) provide a further breakdown of sentences with animate subjects into male and female.

When the subject was male, as in 'He is gay' (statement 3) or 'He looks gay' (statement 10), 57.73% of responses indicated that participants interpreted *gay* as taking a homosexual meaning (Table 6, Version 1). However, the large percentage of multiple responses (19.05%) again indicated that there was a large amount of variability in the perceived meaning of *gay* when used with a male subject.

Table 6 Frequencies of perceived meaning of *gay* with masculine subject (Version 1 and Version 2)

Category	Intensifier <i>so</i> absent (Version 1)		Intensifier <i>so</i> present (Version 2)	
	No. of Responses	%	No. of Responses	%
1	3	1.79 %	1	0.63 %
2	97	57.73 %	113	70.62 %
3 & 4	34	20.24 %	19	11.87 %
5	2	1.19 %	3	1.88 %
6	32	19.05 %	24	15.00 %
TOTAL	168	100 %	160	100 %

Category 1: happy, bright, light hearted, cheerful, fun

Category 2: homosexual, camp, effeminate, stereotypical homosexual traits

Category 3: bad, lame, pathetic, stupid, boring

Category 4: weird, different, strange, unconventional

Category 5: don't know

Category 6: multiple responses given

When however, the intensifier *so* was added to such statements (Table 6, Version 2), the percentage of responses indicating the perceived meaning of *gay* in its 2nd homosexual sense went up to 70.62% (Table 6, Version 2), and the percentage of multiple responses decreased from 19.05% (Table 6, Version 1) to 15.00% (Table 6, Version 2).

When the subject was female, as in 'She is gay' (statement 8) or 'She looks gay' (statement 5), 44.64% of responses indicated that participants interpreted *gay* in its 3rd meaning, 30.95% of responses indicated that participants interpreted *gay* in its 2nd meaning, while 11.32% were multiple responses (Table 7, Version 1).

Table 7 Frequencies of perceived meaning of *gay* with feminine subject (Version 1 and Version 2)

Category	Intensifier <i>so</i> absent (Version 1)		Intensifier <i>so</i> present (Version 2)	
	No. of Responses	%	No. of Responses	%
1	14	8.33 %	2	3.12 %
2	52	30.95 %	92	57.50 %
3 & 4	75	44.64 %	40	25.00 %
5	8	4.76 %	6	3.75 %
6	19	11.32 %	17	10.63 %
TOTAL	168	100 %	160	100 %

Category 1: happy, bright, light hearted, cheerful, fun

Category 2: homosexual, camp, effeminate, stereotypical homosexual traits

Category 3: bad, lame, pathetic, stupid, boring

Category 4: weird, different, strange, unconventional
 Category 5: don't know
 Category 6: multiple responses given

When the intensifier *so* was added to statements with a female subject (Table 7, Version 2), the percentage of responses showing the perceived meaning of *gay* as being the 2nd homosexual sense increased from 30.95% to 57.50%, whereas the percentage of responses showing the perceived meaning of *gay* as being the 3rd 'bad' or 'lame' sense decreased from 44.64% to 25.00%. Thus, in statements such as 'She is so gay' (statement 8) or 'She looks so gay' (statement 5), *gay* was no longer interpreted as having a 'bad' or 'lame' meaning; rather, when the intensifier *so* was used (Table 7, Version 2), the majority of responses (57.50%) indicated that *gay* was interpreted as taking the 2nd homosexual meaning.

The interaction between statements with a feminine subject and the intensifier *so* is shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5 Interaction between *she* and *so*

Plural variable. When the subject was plural as in 'They are gay' (statement 1) or 'They look gay' (statement 6), it was not clear whether the subject was animate or inanimate. This uncertainty seemed to be reflected in the responses. When *so* was absent (Table 8, Version 1), the responses indicated that most participants interpreted *gay* as having a 'bad' or 'lame' meaning (48.21%), with 32.14% interpreting *gay* in its homosexual sense (Table 8, Version 1).

Table 8 Frequencies of perceived meaning of *gay* with plural subject (Version 1 and Version 2)

Category	Intensifier <i>so</i> absent (Version 1)		Intensifier <i>so</i> present (Version 2)	
	No. of Responses	%	No. of Responses	%
1	1	0.60 %	6	3.75 %
2	54	32.14 %	71	44.38 %
3 & 4	81	48.21 %	56	35.00 %
5	4	2.38 %	3	1.87 %

6	28	16.67 %	24	15.00 %
TOTAL	168	100 %	160	100%

Category 1: happy, bright, light hearted, cheerful, fun

Category 2: homosexual, camp, effeminate, stereotypical homosexual traits

Category 3: bad, lame, pathetic, stupid, boring

Category 4: weird, different, strange, unconventional

Category 5: don't know

Category 6: multiple responses given

When however, *so* was present, as in ‘They are so gay’ or ‘They look so gay’, the situation was reversed with 35.00% of responses indicating that participants interpreted *gay* in its 3rd sense, and 44.38% of responses indicating that participants interpreted *gay* in its 2nd homosexual sense (Table 8, Version 2). The multiple responses did not vary very much between Version 1 (16.67%) and Version 2 (15.00%).

The interaction between statements with a plural subject and the intensifier *so* is shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6 Interaction between *they* and *so*

Copula vs. ‘look’ variable. Statements with animate subjects were either presented with the copula, as in ‘He is gay’ (statement 3) and ‘She is gay’ (statement 8), or presented with the verb *look* as in ‘He looks gay’ (statement 10) or ‘She looks gay’ (statement 5).

The responses showed that animate subject statements with the copula were more likely to be interpreted in the 2nd homosexual meaning. Table 9 shows *gay* taking the homosexual sense 55.36% of the time when participants were presented with statements 3 and 8 (Version 1). In the presence of *so* (Version 2), participants were even more likely (77.50% of responses) to interpret such sentences in the homosexual sense, although 11.88% were multiple responses in such contexts (Table 9, Version 2).

Table 9 Frequencies of perceived meaning of *gay* with animate subject plus copula (Version 1 and Version 2)

Intensifier <i>so</i> absent (Version 1)	Intensifier <i>so</i> present (Version 2)
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Category	No. of Responses	%	No. of Responses	%
1	4	2.38 %	1	0.62 %
2	93	55.36 %	124	77.50 %
3 & 4	46	27.38 %	12	7.50 %
5	5	2.98 %	4	2.50 %
6	20	11.90 %	19	11.88 %
TOTAL	168	100 %	160	100 %

Category 1: happy, bright, light hearted, cheerful, fun

Category 2: homosexual, camp, effeminate, stereotypical homosexual traits

Category 3: bad, lame, pathetic, stupid, boring

Category 4: weird, different, strange, unconventional

Category 5: don't know

Category 6: multiple responses given

This contrasts with Table 10 which shows that when presented with statements 5 or 10 (Version 1) in which the subject is animate, but the verb 'to look' is used, almost equal percentages indicated that participants interpreted *gay* as either having a homosexual meaning (33.33% of responses) or a 'bad' or 'lame' meaning (37.50% of responses), with a high 18.45% of responses being multiple (Table 10, Version 1).

Table 10 Frequencies of perceived meaning of *gay* with animate subject plus verb 'to look' (Version 1 and Version 2)

Category	Intensifier <i>so</i> absent (Version 1)		Intensifier <i>so</i> present (Version 2)	
	No. of Responses	%	No. of Responses	%
1	13	7.74 %	5	3.12 %
2	56	33.33 %	81	50.63 %
3 & 4	63	37.50 %	47	29.38 %
5	5	2.98 %	5	3.12 %
6	31	18.45 %	22	13.75 %
TOTAL	168	100 %	160	100 %

Category 1: happy, bright, light hearted, cheerful, fun

Category 2: homosexual, camp, effeminate, stereotypical homosexual traits

Category 3: bad, lame, pathetic, stupid, boring

Category 4: weird, different, strange, unconventional

Category 5: don't know

Category 6: multiple responses given

With the verb 'to look' the percentage of responses that showed participants interpreting *gay* in its 2nd homosexual sense dropped from 55.36% (Table 9, Version 1) to 33.33% (Table 10, Version 1), and the percentage of responses that showed participants interpreting *gay* with the 3rd negative meaning of 'bad' or 'lame' increased from 27.38% (Table 9, Version 1) to 37.50% (Table 10, Version 1). But the difficulty in interpreting *gay* in statements with the verb 'to look' is evident, with 18.45% of responses (Table

10, Version 1) being multiple, an increase from 11.90%, when animate subjects occurred with the copula.

When the intensifier *so* was used with an animate subject, responses indicated that although participants were more likely (77.50%) to interpret *gay* in its homosexual sense when occurring with the copula (Table 9, Version 2), when occurring with the verb ‘to look’ the majority (50.63% of responses) still interpreted it in this sense. However, whereas only 7.50% of responses indicated that participants interpreted *gay* in the 3rd ‘bad’ or ‘lame’ sense when occurring with the copula (Table 9, Version 2), this increased markedly to 29.38% when occurring with the verb ‘to look’ (Table 10, Version 2).

In summary, Study 2 confirms that young Australian university students living in Canberra, aged 18 – 30 years, are most likely either to interpret *gay* in its 2nd homosexual meaning or in its 3rd negative meaning of ‘bad’, ‘lame’ or ‘weird’. Furthermore, Study 2 supports Hypothesis 3 that the meaning of *gay* will vary according to context. In particular,

- the perceived meaning of *gay* is most likely to be the 3rd negative meaning when *gay* is used with inanimate subjects, regardless of the presence or absence of the intensifier, *so* (Tables 2 and 4);
- there is less variability of meaning when interpreting statements with inanimate subjects compared to, for example animate subjects, as evidenced by the relatively few ‘don’t know’ or multiple responses to statements with inanimate subjects (Table 2 and 4).

Study 2 also supports Hypothesis 4 which states that there is an interaction between the presence of the intensifier *so* and the perceived meaning of the word *gay*. The interaction between *gay* and *so* is most clearly evident in statements in which *gay* occurs with an animate subject. In particular,

- for statements with animate (‘he’ or ‘she’) subjects, when the intensifier *so* is absent, responses show that participants are slightly more likely to interpret *gay* as having the 2nd meaning (Table 3), although an overwhelming 18.16% indicated that either they did not know what *gay* means in such contexts (2.98%) or gave multiple responses (15.18%);
- when the intensifier *so* is added to statements with an animate subject, responses showed that participants are much more likely to interpret *gay* as having the 2nd homosexual meaning (Table 5), but again a high percentage (15.62%) of ‘don’t know’ responses (2.81%) and multiple responses (12.81%), indicates that there is variability of meaning when *gay* occurs with an animate subject and the intensifier *so*;
- when *gay* is used with a male subject and the intensifier *so*, the presence of *so* increases the likelihood of *gay* being interpreted in its 2nd homosexual sense, with 57.73% of responses showing that participants interpret *gay* in its homosexual sense when it occurs without the intensifier *so* compared to 70.62% when it occurs with the intensifier *so* (Table 6);
- when *gay* occurs with a female subject and the intensifier *so* (Table 7), responses indicate that the majority of participants change the perceived meaning from the 3rd negative meaning (without *so*) to the 2nd homosexual meaning (with *so*).

6. Discussion

Our results confirm that *gay* is polysemous, with age functioning as a sociolinguistic variable. Study 1 clearly showed that older people (60+) were less aware of the 3rd meaning of *gay* compared to younger people (18 – 30). Study 2 showed that young people were clearly aware of the word *gay* having both the 2nd homosexual meaning and the newer more negative 3rd meaning. It is not surprising that older people are less aware of the 3rd meaning of the word *gay*, because comments from the 18 - 30 year olds indicated that they would only use the 3rd meaning when talking to close friends of their same age. In other words, the new use of *gay* functions as an in-group marker, when talking to peers or when ‘having fun’, as opposed to being used when talking to adults, parents or non-familiar acquaintances.

The polysemy of the word *gay* operates at a number of levels. Not only does *gay* mean different things to different people, it means different things in different contexts. For example, it might mean ‘happy’ or ‘carefree’ for someone aged 70 years old, or ‘homosexual’ for the majority of young and middle-aged people, or it might also mean ‘bad’, ‘lame’ or ‘weird’ for younger people. However, even within the 2nd meaning, there is additional polysemy in that *gay* can multiply refer to someone who identifies as homosexual or to the particular characteristics that are associated with being homosexual. In the first notion of referring to someone who identifies as homosexual, the term *gay* classifies a person, as in ‘a gay’. Such a classification is often interpreted as not being politically correct, in that it conflates homosexual characteristics with homosexual identity. Style manuals (e.g. Non-Discriminatory Language Guidelines, University of Sydney) suggest that applying stereotyped roles to people should be avoided, and that *gay* should only be used as a descriptor, as in ‘a gay man’.

The possibility of *gay*, in its 2nd sense, meaning different things in different contexts has also been discussed by Cameron (1997) in her analysis of US male college students’ talk. She argued that within this particular context of men talking to each other in an all-male interaction, *gay* did not necessarily refer to ‘sexual deviance’, but rather referred to ‘gender deviance’, indicating a person’s failure to measure up to the group’s standards of masculinity or femininity (p. 53). Thus even within this 2nd homosexual sense of *gay*, the way in which *gay* is used in different contexts can result in different understandings of the word *gay*.

Additional polysemy is evident within the 3rd new meaning of the word *gay*. When the subject is inanimate, with or without the intensifier *so*, as in (5) or (6), the overwhelming majority of young people interpreted *gay* in its 3rd meaning, as in ‘bad’, ‘lame’ or ‘weird’. In statements without the intensifier, as in (5), about 86% of responses indicated that participants interpreted *gay* as having the 3rd negative meaning. In statements with the intensifier, as in (6), nearly 90% of responses indicated that participants interpreted *gay* as having the 3rd negative meaning of ‘bad’, ‘lame’ or ‘weird’.

- (5) That film was gay.
- (6) That film was so gay.

Thus, in this particular context, the responses show that the participants were very clear about what *gay* means.

However, something happens when the subject is animate, as in (7) and (8). First of all, there was a change in meaning with the majority of responses (although a much smaller majority of only about 44%) indicating that *gay* in such contexts should be interpreted as having the 2nd meaning. Secondly there was a greater variability in terms of whether *gay* should be interpreted in its 2nd homosexual meaning or in its 3rd negative meaning.

- (7) He is/looks gay.
- (8) She is/looks gay.

Although the majority (about 44%) of responses to sentences with an animate subject indicated that participants understood *gay* to have the 2nd homosexual meaning, about one-third of responses indicated that participants understood it to have the 3rd negative meaning, and nearly 20% of responses indicated that either the participants did not know what *gay* meant in such contexts or they gave multiple responses. When such statements were examined individually, it was clear that the perceived meaning of *gay* varied according to the gender of the subject. For example, when the subject was male (7), only 20% of responses indicated that *gay* in such statements meant ‘bad’, ‘lame’ or ‘weird’, with nearly 60% of responses indicating that *gay* meant ‘homosexual’. However, when the subject was female (8), the opposite occurred, with nearly 45% of responses indicating that *gay* meant ‘bad’, ‘lame’ or ‘weird’ and only about 30% of responses indicating that *gay* had a homosexual meaning. Thus the perceived meaning of *gay* varies according to the gender of the subject—*gay* is more likely to be interpreted as meaning homosexual in sentences with male subjects, whereas *gay* is more likely to be interpreted as meaning ‘bad’ or ‘lame’ in sentences with female subjects.

The uncertainty of the meaning of *gay* was most apparent in sentences with a plural subject, as in (9), where it was not clear whether the subject was animate or inanimate.

- (9) They are/look gay.

When, however, *gay* was modified by *so* in sentences, such as in (10), (11) and (12), the picture changed yet again, in that the presence of *so* seemed to increase the likelihood of interpreting *gay* in the 2nd meaning and decreased the likelihood of interpreting *gay* as having the 3rd meaning.

- (10) He is/looks so gay.
- (11) She is/looks so gay.
- (12) They are/look so gay.

For example, nearly 60% of responses indicated that participants interpreted male-subject sentences, such as (7), as having a homosexual meaning. When modified by *so*, as in (10), this increased to about 71%. For female-subject sentences, such as (8) and (11), a similar effect occurred although the percentage nearly doubled from 31% of responses indicating a homosexual meaning for sentences without *so*, to nearly 60% of responses indicating a homosexual meaning for sentences with *so*.

In other words, in sentences with animate subjects, the presence of the intensifier *so* increased the likelihood of the sentence being interpreted as having a homosexual meaning. This is in contrast to sentences with an inanimate subject, where the presence

of the intensifier *so* reduced the likelihood of the sentence being interpreted as having a homosexual meaning.

Thus, we have a clear instance of the sort of vagueness that can be associated with polysemy (Tuggy, 1993). When *gay* occurred within particular contexts such that the meaning could be interpreted in a variety of ways, as in (8) and (9), then, when those statements were modified by *so*, the interpretation of the meaning also seemed to change, with the majority of responses changing the perceived meaning from the 3rd negative meaning (without *so*) to a homosexual meaning (with *so*).

Early research indicated that *so* was associated with colloquial speech (e.g. Partridge, 1970) and with women's language use (e.g. Jespersen, 1922; Lakoff, 1973).⁹ However, more recent research has demonstrated how intensifiers that 'scale up' (Bolinger, 1972:17) an adverb or adjective, such as *so* or *really*, are in the process of delexicalisation (Ito and Tagliamonte, 2003; Tagliamonte and Roberts, 2005). As part of such delexicalisation, there is a 'reduction of the independent lexical content of a word, or group of words, so that it comes to fulfil a particular function but has no meaning apart from this to contribute to the phrase in which it occurs' (Partington, 1993:183). For example, in Tagliamonte and Roberts' (2005) data, examining the use of intensifiers in the television series *Friends*, they show how *so* is only used with adjectives such as 'cool', 'weird' and 'funny'. However, they hypothesise that as the process of delexicalisation progresses, *so* will extend across all adjectives (p. 294).

It is not surprising, therefore, that this new 3rd meaning of *gay* is associated with the intensifier *so*. According to Peters (1994:269), the most rapid and interesting semantic developments in linguistic change occur with intensifiers. Changing the meaning of intensifiers enables the speaker to demonstrate their originality, their verbal skills, and to capture the attention of the audience (Peters, 1994:271). In our data, when *so* modified *gay*, it not only intensified the quality of the adjective *gay*, it also worked in some contexts (e.g. female-subject and plural) to shift the likelihood of the perceived meaning of the word itself. For example, in sentences with an inanimate subject, responses indicated that participants were less likely to assign a homosexual meaning to *so gay*, whereas in sentences with animate subjects, responses indicated participants were more likely to assign a homosexual meaning to *so gay*.

In terms of interaction between age and gender, Labov's (1990) Principle II predicts that for change below the level of conscious awareness women lead men in the use of incoming, non-standard variants. Although Labov's analysis concerns phonological variation, it is generally held that women are also the instigators of semantic change (e.g. Kuha, 2004). It is therefore interesting to examine the results from both Study 1 and 2 to see if there is evidence to support such a prediction. Study 1 showed that there was a gender difference with men (across all ages from 18 – 70) being slightly more likely to interpret *gay* as having the 2nd homosexual meaning, and women being slightly more likely to interpret *gay* in the 3rd negative meaning. Results from Study 1 would therefore, at first glance, appear to minimally support Principle II.

However, as demonstrated in Tagliamonte's (1998) study of non-standard uses of *were* in York, it is only through examination of the language use of younger speakers that it was possible to show how the spread of non-standard *were* was being led by women. Similarly, it is through Study 2's question how young participants (ages 18 - 30)

themselves use *gay* (Question 12) that we can get closer to understanding whether Principle II is correct in predicting that women lead the way in terms of this incoming, non-standard variant. Table 1 gives some support for Principle II by showing that young women (18 – 30) use *gay* only in its 3rd sense more than men. However, as with studies that rely on averages to understand language use rather than examining the interactional detail of individual speakers, there is insufficient information concerning how individuals themselves use *gay* in particular contexts. What does seem to be clear from Table 1, however, is that women appear to be clearer about their usage of *gay*, with fewer women than men using both the 2nd and 3rd meanings, and more women than men using only the 2nd homosexual meaning (Table 1). However, one of the reasons why there does not seem to be a strong gender division in terms of how *gay* is currently being used may be due to the derogatory nature of the 3rd meaning of *gay*. We now turn to this issue.

Having a 3rd potentially derogatory meaning for the word *gay* is not without its problems. A number of participants indicated that they explicitly refrain from using the term *gay* meaning ‘bad’, ‘lame’ or ‘weird’ because of its negative connotations. One participant, for example, indicated that she avoided using it with her gay and lesbian friends for this very reason. Thus, some young people hold that such usage is not ‘politically correct’. Others, however, indicated that although they know it has a negative connotation, they find it difficult not to use such terminology, due to its common usage.

The issue of whether using *gay* in its 3rd negative meaning is homophobic was also commented upon, with some participants arguing that to use *gay* in this more negative sense was clearly homophobic. As Flood and Hamilton (2005) argue in their discussion of homophobia in Australia, although in its technical sense, ‘homophobia’ refers to ‘the unreasoning fear or hatred of homosexuals and to anti-homosexual beliefs and prejudices’ (p. 1), it can also include a general attitude of intolerance, including derogatory or insulting remarks (p. 3). The very use of negative, derogatory terminology can therefore contribute to, and reinforce, the intolerance of those already homophobic, thus sanctioning homophobic attitudes within the community (Armstrong, 1997).

However, in contrast to the above perception that to use such terminology was homophobic, a number of participants stated that the new 3rd meaning of ‘bad’, ‘lame’ or ‘weird’ has nothing to do with the homosexual meaning. Such a perception might be due to the fact that survey results have shown that 18 - 24 year olds are the least homophobic of all Australians (Flood and Hamilton, 2005:10). One participant in our survey stated that such terminology cannot be interpreted homophobically because it is so widely used; as a result, it no longer carries homosexual connotations when used in this new context.¹⁰

However, as Baker (2005) argues, it is this sense of ambiguity that surrounds terms such as *gay* that contributes to homophobia, with the polysemy of the term itself reflecting ‘the ambivalence that parts of society feel towards homosexuality’ (p. 225). For gay men and lesbians to hear such pejorative language being used in everyday situations, may carry a homophobic message.

7. Conclusion

The current study has demonstrated that *gay* has taken on a new meaning for Australian young people up to 30 years of age. However, this new meaning of *gay* varies according to the context. Our study showed that when used with an inanimate subject, with or without the intensifier *so*, *gay* was most likely to be interpreted as meaning ‘bad’, ‘lame’ or ‘feeble’. When used with a male subject, this was much less likely. In fact, *gay* was more likely to be interpreted as having a homosexual meaning in male-subject sentences, and when male-subject sentences were modified by the intensifier *so*, it was even more likely that they were interpreted in a homosexual sense. When *gay* occurred with a female subject, there was greater variability, with a third interpreting *gay* in its homosexual sense, but a bit less than half interpreting *gay* in its 3rd negative sense. Although this new meaning of *gay* is used as an identity marker for young people, it is not, however, without its problems. A number of participants indicated their reluctance to use expressions such as ‘that’s so gay’ because of the homophobic overtones. One issue for future studies will be to assess whether this new meaning will last, in that there is a tendency for linguistic innovations to be rejected, once there is a social awareness of the phenomena (Labov, 1990).

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¹ As noted by Tagliamonte and Robert (2005:281), television greatly influences the way we talk.

² A recent online LINGIST discussion (25 Feb 2002) <http://listserv.linguistlist.org/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind0202d&L=linguist&D=1&P=1777> [Accessed 16 June 2006] attempted to understand who was using this term. Although the usage was presented as being a recent innovation by the person requesting information, many respondents (predominantly American) indicated that the term was not new and that it had been around in their childhood in the 1970's and 1980's. The discussion confirmed that it was mostly used by the younger generation, and that older people, apart from teachers and those in contact with young people, were simply not aware of the new usage.

³ The rationale for choosing only native speakers of Australian English was to ensure that respondents would be aware of all meaning of *gay*. Non-native speakers may have only learnt one usage of the word and therefore would skew the results.

⁴ Statements were taken from online LINGIST discussion (25 Feb 2002) on the use of *gay* <http://listserv.linguistlist.org/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind0202d&L=linguist&D=1&P=1777> [Accessed 16 June 2006].

⁵ The terminology associated with words such as *so*, *really* and *very* ranges from 'intensive adverbs' (Stoffel, 1901), to 'degree words' (Bolinger, 1972), to 'amplifiers' (Quirk et al, 1985). In this paper, we refer to them as 'intensifiers', following Bolinger (1972:17).

⁶ Participants were excluded from the study if they were over 30 years of age and if they answered ‘no’ to both Questions 15 and 16. The latter excluded participants from participating in the study if their first language was not English and if they had not been schooled in Australia.

⁷ This does not mean, however, that the 3rd negative meaning of *gay* does not incorporate ideas such as ‘weird’, ‘different’, ‘strange’ or ‘unconventional’, it only means that within the contexts provided, respondents were not able to satisfactorily distinguish between the two ideas. Additional context would need to be provided in order to make any distinction between *gay* meaning ‘bad’ or ‘lame’ and *gay* meaning ‘weird’ or ‘different’ possible.

⁸ The category of multiple responses indicates the number of participants who gave more than one category for the statements.

⁹ We are not referring here to what has been called the gen-X use of *so* (Kuha, 2004), as in ‘I so won’t put up with that nonsense’.

¹⁰ In an attempt to avoid possible negative messages an internet slang term, ‘ghey’ has been coined that retains the negative 3rd sense of *gay* while attempting to avoid overt links to the homosexual meaning of *gay* (<http://ghey.com/>).

Appendix A: Questionnaire from Study 1

The following statements were taken from a discussion on the internet. For each of the statements, please write in the space provided what you think *gay* means. Write one or two words that have the same meaning of gay in that statement. You can use one word more once. If the sentence does not make sense to you, please write 'Don't Know'.

1. Our hearts were young and *gay*

2. My Easter dress and hat were so *gay*

3. That shirt is so *gay*!

4. He's wearing a superman hat. He's so *gay*.

5. A boy ripped the shirt of another boy saying, "That shirt was so *gay*, you should thank me."

6. He is *gay*.

7. They have scheduled me 2 A-level exams for the same day. How *gay*.

8. That party was so *gay*

9. That film was so *gay*.

10. That was the *gayest* New Year's Eve ever.

11. He couldn't believe they still watched Neighbours, because it was so *gay* now.

12. How *gay* is that?

13. That performance was so *gay*

14. We can't play football because the soccer team is practicing. That's so *gay*!

15. That was a *gay* question

16. That trip yesterday was so *gay*

17. During a basketball game, one player says to another "That was a *gay* throw."

18. This class is totally *gay*.

19. The bus is late again. That's so *gay*.

20. They made everyone get off the subway and wait for the next one...that was pretty *gay*.

Do you have any comments on the word *gay*?

Demographic Information

I am _____ years old.

Occupation: _____

I am: ☐ male ☐ female
My first language is English. ☐ yes ☐ no
If not, were you schooled in Australia (i.e. - from primary school onwards)

☐ yes ☐ no
I have children ☐ yes ☐ no

My children are _____ years old. _____ years old. _____ years old. _____ years old.

Appendix B: Questionnaire from Study 2

Version 1

Below are a series of statements. Please read each one, and use the numbers below to indicate what you think *gay* means in the statement. You may use more than one number, if necessary.

1	2	3	4	5
Happy	Homosexual	Bad	Weird	Don't Know
Bright	Camp	Lame	Different	
Light hearted	Effeminate	Pathetic	Strange	
Cheerful	"Stereotypical	Stupid	Unconventional	
Fun	homosexual	Boring		
	traits"			

Imagine that a young person says to you

1. "They're *gay*".....
2. "That film was *gay*"
3. "He is *gay*"
4. "This party is *gay*".
5. "She looks *gay*"
6. "They look *gay*"
7. "That shirt is *gay*"
8. "She is *gay*"
9. "That class was *gay*"
10. "He looks *gay*"
11. "That's *gay*"

12. Which of the uses listed at the top of the page do you use? You may tick more than one.

- ☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

When and with whom do you use these uses of *gay*? If you ticked more than one above, please state the context for each use.

13. Are you: ☐ Male ☐ Female

14. I am _____ years old.

15. My first language is English. ☐ yes ☐ no

16. If no, were you schooled in Australia ☐ yes ☐ no

17. Do you have any comments?

Appendix B: Questionnaire from Study 2

Version 2

Below are a series of statements. Please read each one, and use the numbers below to indicate what you think *gay* means in the statement. You may use more than one number, if necessary.

1	2	3	4	5
Happy	Homosexual	Bad	Weird	Don't Know
Bright	Camp	Lame	Different	
Light hearted	Effeminate	Pathetic	Strange	
Cheerful	"Stereotypical	Stupid	Unconventional	
Fun	homosexual	Boring		
	traits"			

Imagine that a young person says to you

1. "They're so *gay*"
2. "That film was so *gay*"
3. "He is so *gay*"
4. "This party is so *gay*"
5. "She looks so *gay*"
6. "They look so *gay*"
7. "That shirt is so *gay*"
8. "She is so *gay*"
9. "That class was so *gay*"
10. "He looks so *gay*"
11. "That's so *gay*"

12. Which of the uses listed at the top of the page do you use? You may tick more than one.

- ☐ 1
 ☐ 2
 ☐ 3
 ☐ 4
 ☐ 5

When and with whom do you use these uses of *gay*? If you ticked more than one above, please state the context for each use.

13. Are you: ☐ Male ☐ Female

14. I am _____ years old.

15. My first language is English. ☐ yes ☐ no

16. If no, were you schooled in Australia ☐ yes ☐ no

17. Do you have any comments?