Defining snowflake in British post-Brexit and US post-election public discourse

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Abstract. The paper addresses the meaning that the snowflake lexeme has acquired in public discourse in the post-Brexit UK and the post-election USA. The research of online publications and audience’s comments reveals that snowflake, metaphorical by origin, is used to denote a representative of Generation Y and, consequently, verbalizes an intergenerational divide. This semantic nucleus is coupled with the meaning ‘a psychological type that combines such traits as hypersensitivity, intolerance and sense of entitlement’, which invests the lexeme with negative connotations. When used in an argument, the connotative meaning may supplant the denotation, turning snowflake into a pejorative label.

Keywords: lexeme, semantics, denotation, connotation, metaphor, snowflake generation.

Introduction. Issues of generations and their peculiarities are the field of sociology and, for a number of reasons, became important in the 20th century. To keep the wheel of industry turning, manufacturers had to study consumers’ needs and turn to advertising agencies to promote products in an appealing way. In the end of the 20th century – at the beginning of the 21st century the trend to commodify everything became obvious: it is not only material goods that are offered for sale. Education, in particular university education, has turned into a service and educational centres compete for students, struggle for new markets, adjust to new circumstances and elaborate their image-building campaigns. Similar competition is observed in the political sphere which has been transformed into show biz where politicians sell their image rather than ideas or ideologies. In all the cases, senders of messages are aware of the competitive environment and study carefully their recipients to win them over.

In 2016, the UK European membership referendum and the US presidential election rhetoric drew on social stratification issues and the divide ran, among other things, along generational differences. Since Brexit and Donald Trump’s entering the White House were crucial to the states’ future, in both cases “countervoted” citizens experienced severe frustration. The common assumption that both events were the choice of the older generation has soon became very emotional, since the participants did not hesitate to appeal to audience’s feeling of belonging, i.e. identity, by coining, investing with specific connotations and using new lexemes to denote generational affiliations.

Theoretical Background. One of the sociological models, frequently used to describe a society and, consequently, to study potential recipients of a message, is the generational theory suggested by William Strauss and Neil Howe in Generations. The History of American Future, 1584 to 2069 [8]. The scholars use the term “generation” as the smallest unit and define “generation” as the aggregate of all people born over a span of roughly 20 years and sharing 1) location in history, 2) behaviours and beliefs, and 3) perceived membership. The sociologists distinguish four types of generations that have been recurring throughout American history. Nowadays, the theory has ceased being a scientific hypothesis and become a part of background knowledge: its notions often surface in all types of discourse and the claim that generations are classifiable because their members share essential features is treated as axiom.

Within the framework of the generational theory, the modern society is seen as an arena for three generations: Baby Boom Generation (Prophet) made up of people born between 1943-1960, Generation X (Nomad) born between 1961-1981 and Millennial Generation also called Generation Y (Hero) born between 1982-2004. The youngest generation (Generation Z or Post-Millennials) is not yet active participants in the society, therefore has no significant impact on social processes.

Objective. The meaning of some coinages to denote the British and US generational groups is quite straightforward: the UK referendum has given such terms as Remainiacs (supporters of the UK as EU member) and Brexiteers (those who voted for leaving the EU), while the US presidential campaign has produced Trumpism, Trumpers and Clintonites. In all the cases, the words explicate political preferences. Yet, there are coinages to denote different generations and their referential meaning is undoubtedly overshadowed by negative connotations. These lexemes are boomerang generation, Snowflake Generation/Generation Snowflake, Selfie Generation as well as overtly judgemental ‘My Parents Never Said No’ Generation and Me, Me, Me Generation. Among these, the most frequently used and the least semantically transparent is Snowflake Generation. The objective of the research is to gain an insight into the semantics of the snowflake lexeme as it is used in UK and USA public discourse.

Data collection and methods. Wherever there is a social divide, there are language means used or even designed specifically for the purposes of debating. To achieve the objective of the study, the research draws on the nomination theory and the Conceptual Metaphor Theory that enable linguists to explain formation of new lexemes and relate them to other language units as well as shed light onto speakers’ worldview. The application of contextual analysis allows to reveal specific functions of a lexeme in communication.

The material of the research is articles and blogs published in British and American newspapers [1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9] and readers’ feedback (comments).

Analysis and discussion. Collins Dictionary recognized the term snowflake as the seventh in the ten-item list of 2016 words of the year, defining it as the young adults of the 2010s, viewed as being less resilient and more prone to take offence than previous generations [7].

The Financial Times included snowflake in its annual Year in a word list and defined it as ‘a derogatory term for someone deemed too emotionally vulnerable to cope with views that challenge their own, particularly in universities and other forums once known for robust debate’. In November 2016 the Guardian published an article by Rebecca Nicholson titled unambiguously ‘Poor little snowflake’ – the defining insult of 2016’ where the journalist labels snowflake
as ‘the most combustible insult of 2016’. Nicholson points out that the term ‘emerged a few years ago on American campuses as a means of criticizing the hypersensitivity of a younger generation’. It comes from a much-memed line from Chuck Palahniuk’s Fight Club: ‘You are not special. You are not a beautiful and unique snowflake. You are the same organic and decaying matter as everyone else’ [5]. (It should be noted that there is an elaborated term, the Special Snowflake, defined in the Urban Dictionary as a person who believes they are different and unique from everyone else because of something they are or do. This thing they are or do most commonly is something many other people are doing [10].)

The term Snowflake Generation, or its variant Generation Snowflake, has been brought into the public debate by Claire Fox who has published the book I Find That Offensive! [3] where she analyses confrontation between Yale University students and faculty Head of College, Nicholas Christakis. According to Fox, members of Generation Snowflake ‘are genuinely distressed by ideas that run contrary to their worldview’ and are more likely than previous generations of students to report that they have mental health problems. So, the term snowflake is used to refer to university campus population and is immediately related to a number of cognitive distortion processes that are claimed to be typical of modern university discourse and introduce new terms into academic discourse, e.g. trigger warning, safe space and microaggression.

Having dwelled on dictionary and ‘personalized’ definitions, it is worthwhile to study semantic components of snowflake that are revealed in readers’ discussions that follow the articles on generation issues.

First of all, some readers draw on the snowflake metaphor, which may lead, paradoxically, both to semantic amelioration and deterioration. Thus, (1) is an example of the former: snowflake is not offensive and does not imply complete helplessness, since no matter how fragile a snowflake may be, a multitude of snowflakes does make a difference. The reader, nicknamed HorseCart, adds that harmless snowflakes, if complacently neglected, can indeed bring about extensive damage:

(1) Leviathan: It’s not much of an insult. Millions of snowflakes together make an avalanche, HorseCart: Or they melt in spring to flood the complacent valley-dwellers. [5].

Putting aside elaborations of the metaphor itself, one can notice several components in the snowflake semantics. The most general one is “person belonging to a particular group of people”. The analysis has revealed that the group in question may be youngsters, college/middle class students and graduates, or comparatively privileged people (middle class, university educated) [5: goodtable], or a generation (or rather part of one) of young adults that are ill-equipped to cope in the adult world [5: AfraidOfSunlight].

The age-group basis of the snowflake term is indirectly backed up by comments on the age of those who like using the term, namely baby boomers and GenXers. This is what appears from the interaction below:

(2) peppermintish: Mostly this term is used by people who get upset that they get called racist, (...) So mostly used by hypocrites and greedy babyboomers who can’t understand wanting to help people regardless of the place they were expelled from a womb. – hygrocbe: Come on, ‘snowflake’ is a far too recent and trendy a word to be used by so called ‘baby boomers’. They’ve only recently got the hang of posting photos of their cats or their patios on their Facebook pages. It is much more of a Generation X word for Generations Y and Z. Fight Club (novel and film) was popular amongst the Generation X crowd [5].

The final passage from Claire Fox’s article is another example that illustrates how snowflake is made a term to refer to the entire generation:

(3) We – adult society – protect children from criticism and suspend our critical judgment in order to massage their self-esteem. We scare them rigid by ‘catastrophising’ an endless list of fears. We make them hyper-vigilant about potential abuse from adults and their peers. We encourage them to equate abusive words with physical violence. And we have, in short, shaped our own overanxious, easily offended, censoriously thin-skinned Frankenstein monster. We created Generation Snowflake” [2].

In (3), in every sentence, we, i.e., adults, parents, takes the place of the subject while they is used as an object, which boosts the meaning of passive position of young people as a homogeneous group whose personality is depicted as a mere product of parenting.

Yet, a number of readers underline that snowflake is not so much a term to name an age or social group but rather a word to refer to a psychotype:

(4) KatyEB: I’ve never understood this term as applying particularly to young people – generally it’s used about anyone who demands special treatment because they’re ‘different from everybody else’, or someone who needs all their own particularities catered to. (...) It’s the special treatment demands that define the snowflake, not the disability or gender issues or whatever. [5]

(5) needaname100: I don’t see snowflake as an insult to young people. I see it as a term that describes very very thin skinned people who cant leave a “safe space” (and there is a possibility that they see everyone outside that safe space as bigots because...well...because). [5]

(6) bromley: Definitely see it as aimed towards “safe spacers” and “no platforming” rather than young people in general [5].

Viewed as an age group and a psychotype, snowflakes are regarded as overprotected children who grew up to become censorious cry-babies, arrogant, hyper-sensitive/over-sensitive, narcissistic, self-oriented thin-skinned emperors endowed with an almost belligerent sense of entitlement [2] and living in a culture in which everyone must think twice before speaking up, lest they face charges of insensitivity, aggression, or worse [4]. The terms sensitivity, intolerance and entitlement seem to be snowflakes’ key features and persistently recur in the discourse.

Sensitivity, for example, is referred to in the comment where the young are called wussies with a serious problem of entitlement and instant gratification, a natural result of the wussification of the World [2: reagangs]; the lack of gratitude in the young is engendered by the liberal parenting which produces ‘snowflake’ vulnerability [2: Teacher]; There is a ‘Generation Snowflake’ who are feeble, neurotic and self-obsessed – the Selfie Generation, the ‘My Parents Never Said No’ Generation [5: SpangleJ]. Other lexemes used to talk about excessive emotionality of snowflakes are whingers and moaners.

Interestingly, some commentators point out that the term snowflake is not new:

(7) mattutes: This has been a mild insult for decades. 2016 doesn’t own it. [5]

Others, however, claim that snowflake for ‘a hypersensitive and vulnerable and person’ is a recent coinage for an old
concept that used to be verbalized with the help of sensitive flower [5: georges1], poor little mite [5: WinstonTheChair], big girls blouse [5: rounnyw].

Intolerance to different opinions is the second feature that defines a snowflake as a psychotype and it is verbalized in a number of ways:

(8) Tamar123: Bigoted purveyors of hate of anyone not adhering to their world view would be a more accurate insult. Snowflake gives the impression of harmlessness which they are anything but. [5]

Generally speaking, any generation gap arises from unwillingness of different age groups to acknowledge each other’s viewpoints, yet Western culture was (and still is) becoming more politically polarized. Republicans and Democrats have never particularly liked each other, but survey data going back to the 1970s show that on average, their mutual dislike used to be surprisingly mild. Negative feelings have grown steadily stronger, however, particularly since the early 2000s. (…) A recent study shows that implicit or unconscious biases are now at least as strong across political parties as they are across races’ [4].

Generational divide nowadays lies not only in supporting different ideologies but also in using different media. The peculiarity of modern social networks is to enable people not only to exchange ideas but also to form groups. Generation Y, these first true “social-media natives”, are different from members of previous generations in how they go about sharing their moral judgments and supporting one another in moral campaigns and conflicts: young people today are engaged with one another, with news stories, and with pro-social endeavors to a greater degree than when the dominant technology was television [5]. Communication in social networks encourages intolerance: social media makes it extraordinarily easy to join crusades, express solidarity and outrage, and shun traitors [5]. In addition, though full of diverse information, the Internet helps every user to filter information input and shields from differently perceptive information, the Internet helps every user to filter in-outrage, and shun traitors [5].

In other words, the whole thing about special snowflakes’ immaturity, which is related, in its turn, to hypersensitivity:

(12) Sara Snow: While I agree that housing prices have skyrocketed and good jobs have become scarcer, Snowflakes don’t help themselves by blowing their money on bling; tattoos, piercings, designer everything, unnecessarily state-of-the-art tech, clubbing, and eating out. There’s a serious problem with entitlement and instant gratification. [2]

(13) grammaob: Sorry, young folks, it took me too much work for too many years to give away what I have left. [2]

Both the sense of entitlement and expectations of instant gratification stem from special snowflakes’ immaturity, which is related, in its turn, to hypersensitivity:

(14) MuuPuklip: Er… Psychobabble nonsense. That and it sounds like a pre-teen boy talking about making a den in the woods, not an adult able to function in the adult world. Which encapsulates nicely the whole thing about special snowflakes. To put in bluntly, you don’t get to be two years old forever. [5 MuuPuklip]"
(16) They have been told by their parents and their teachers that they can have it all. Go and get a media studies degree Tarquin, yes Florian you can become a criminologist, just like those nice people on television, but he’s not told that the police service has been cut to the bone and that criminologists are being laid off. (...) And what about young Isabella? She'd love to do singing and dancing. Mummy and Daddy support her so much and think she's tremendous on stage, on Facebook and in school plays. (...) Mrs May's government needs to tell the snowflake generation that their degrees in media, film studies and singing and dancing are a waste of time, they're extra-curricular activities and a waste of taxpayers' money... Those that voted for Brexit are on brickbuilding courses, NVQs or trying desperately to get a nursing or midwifery course [1].

However, some readers rightly note that snowflake has no other function in debates and no other meaning but that of negative labeling one’s opponent. The intensity of pejorative connotations is felt differently by speakers and range from a friendly expression of mockery to an insult that equals the offensive and unacceptable in Western societies terms racist and fascist.

(17) OnionMuffin: It’s just a family friendly, easily printable way of shutting someone down. Also, it’s just another word that gets learnt and then used with abandon by people with no original thoughts, like the terms ‘remoaners’ and ‘woolly liberal’ and ‘loomin lefty’. [5]

(18) Ruben Richardson: Just as saying somebody is racist ‘shuts down debate’ so does calling those on the left snowflakes. Literally everything that the right claim to hate about the left they do themselves. Left wing media always attacks white men? Right wing media always attacks muslims. Left wingers want westerners to respect other cultures (head-dress) to not cause offence? Right wingers want everyone to wear a poppy so not to cause offence. Both sides are mirrors of each other its just the reasons behind the stances that should be judged. [5]

(19) peppermintish: People get offended by being called racist think it is then legitimate to vote for fascists. [5]

The manipulative potential of any social categorization, of which snowflake is a case, is summed up by one of the readers with a well-known aphorism:

(20) BennCarey: Divide and rule. The oldest and most successful form of control. [5]

Conclusion. The analysis of online publications and readers’ comments exposes a social divide that materialized in the results of the UK referendum and the US presidential election in 2016. The vocabulary used by the opponents ranges from neutral coinages to anthroponyms heavily loaded with negative connotations, snowflake being so frequent that it has become the word of the year. Snowflake is used to denote Generation Y and opposes it to older generations (baby boomers and Generation X). Yet, snowflake (or special snowflake) conveys negative connotations and has come to mean a psychological type, with sensitivity, intolerance, sense of entitlement and immaturity being the dominant traits. The evaluative component is so strong that the opponents end up being stuck in a circular argument: critical elderly are accused of hypersensitivity and intolerance to young people’s views. As a result, snowflake loses its denotive meaning and preserves only connotations, turning into a pejorative label used to discredit the opponent.

REFERENCES


Семантика лексемы snowflake в британском и американском публичном дискурсе после Бреxита и президентских выбо- ров 2016 года
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Аннотация. Исследование Интернет-публикаций и последующих комментариев читателей, посвященных так называемому Бреxиту и президентских выборов в США 2016 года выявило использование лексемы snowflake для обозначения поколения Y и, следовательно, вербализации межпоколенческого конфликта. Денотативное ядро дополняется значением «психологический тип, характеризующийся гиперчувствительностью, нервимостью и ощущением права на благополучие», что наделяет лексему негативными коннотациями, которые в дискуссии выступают как денотативное значение, превращая слово snowflake в пренебрежительный жарк.

Ключевые слова: лексема, семантика, денотативное значение, коннотация, метафора, поколение snowflake.