

## 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> century – at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> 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 Union 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 only fuelled the generation gap issue: *Trumpers* and *Brexiters* turned out to be baby boomers and GenXers, while *Clintonites* and *Remainiacs* appeared to be mostly Millennials. The public debate 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 *Brexiters* (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 baby boomers who can’t understand wanting to help people regardless of the place they were expelled from a womb.* – hygrocybe: *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 dont 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 *ensorious cry-babies, arrogant, hyper-sensitive/oversensitive, 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: ronnyw].

**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-minded people, which blinds to alternative perspectives. And, naturally, feeds self-righteousness and intolerance.

Thus, intolerance is expressed towards people with different political preferences, which leads to a paradox: both leftist and rightist parties use *snowflake* as an insult to label each other and to accuse the political opponents of intolerance, i.e. of being sensitive, extremely opinionated and never ready to compromise:

(9) Mandrake: *Such hypersensitivity to opposing views is just what the Marxist Left wants, and has achieved – not just speech control, but now thought control.* [2]

At the same time, paradoxically, conservative Trump, who campaigns against *snowflake*-like behavior and worldview, is *the biggest 'snowflake' out there* because *there's nobody as thin-skinned or hypersensitive as him* [5: Botham77], *Trump...is the thinnest-skinned person ever to get elected President...if they try to snark about 'safe spaces', I point out that Trump called for theatres to be safe spaces* [5: BlueJam]. In doing so, Trump is just like right-wing Brexiteers who *want to turn the UK into one huge safe space away from ideas they don't like...* [5: Ruben Richardson]. Cf.:

(10) RayGillGumm: *...right-wing blowhards... 're the biggest snowflakes going, crying because Emily Thornberry posted a picture of a flag, spitting their dummies because Top Gear presenters drove a car near a monument. "Why can't we say Christmas anymore?", they wail, to the consternation of nobody, as nobody cares if they say Christmas*

*or not. It's a non-stop whirlwind of manufactured offence, ginned up by the Mail and other grievance-peddlers...and then they have the temerity to accuse others of being precious!* [5]

(The material contains only one comment that claims the political divide actually is geographically determined: *...the real snowflakes are the Middle Englanders and the people in the Deep South who vote for Brexit/Trump out of spite because those nasty liberals called them few names* [5: geniusofmzart])

The sense of **entitlement**, sometimes referred to as *e-word*, is the third typical feature of *snowflakes* as a psychotype and it is where the age difference is brought to the fore the most. For example, the ironic suggestion of a young reader that the older generation should give up some of their material possession for the sake of younger people (*Perhaps some of you old folks would be happy to give up your homes so that some poor young folk can finally afford their own home in which to spread their wings?* [2: Helen T]) builds up the 'old vs young' opposition. The 'old folks' react unambiguously and do not hesitate to diagnose such expectations as *the problem of entitlement and instant gratification*:

(11) PetaJ: *Many of those 'old folks' were 'poor young folk' once, also struggling to afford their own home. The difference is...the vast majority of them didn't have the problem of entitlement and instant gratification.* [2]

(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 year old forever.* [5 MuuPuklip]

Overall, the study of post-article discussions reveal a striking difference between older people's worldviews and expectations and those of younger generation: Gen Y accuses their parents and grandparents of insensitivity and taking over all resources, while the older generations believe the young are just lazy and irresponsible:

(15) vammyp: *...most of the 'snowflake' type only attend protests to get out for the afternoon, or post a snap on Instagram with a right-on hashtag for a handful of likes though in fact the average 'snowflake' has considerably better prospects than the people they claim to speak for.* [5]

In other words, older people are sarcastic about *snowflakes'* childish assumption that *they alone are important and that their prime purpose in life is to 'follow their dreams'* regardless of the rights and entitlements of others [2: Teacher].

*Being desperately out of touch with reality* [19: Edwin Manning] is allegedly the *snowflakes'* hallmark which determines their career choice no less than their lifestyle. Many authors remark that Generation Y are brought up in such a way that will inevitably lead to a catastrophe when they face reality:

(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 'loonie 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-know 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 denotative meaning and preserves only connotations, turning into a pejorative label used to discredit the opponent.

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#### Семантика лексемы *snowflake* в британском и американском публичном дискурсе после Брексита и президентских выборов 2016 года

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**Аннотация.** Исследование Интернет-публикаций и последующих комментариев читателей, посвященных так называемому Брекситу и президентских выборов в США 2016-го года выявило использование лексемы *snowflake* для обозначения поколения Y и, следовательно, вербализацию межпоколенческого конфликта. Денотативное ядро дополняется значением «психологический тип, характеризующийся гиперчувствительностью, нетерпимостью и ощущением права на благополучие», что наделяет лексему негативными коннотациями, которые в дискуссии вытесняют денотативное значение, превращая слово *snowflake* в пренебрежительный ярлык.

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