

'Bogan': Polite or not? Cultural implications of a term in Australian slang

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Abstract

Although changes in the usage of words in English are emerging through globalisation and travel, Australian slang has kept its strong ties to Australian culture. The main aim of this research was to look at the term 'bogan', whether it is used in a derogatory way in Australian English, and what effects culture can have on its use and acceptance. Research was conducted using a small corpus built of Australian slang and data taken from ethno-pragmatic interviews with Australian-born native speakers of English. It was concluded from the research that the term can be used both negatively, as a negative comment or impolite projection of a social identity onto a person who does not identify themselves within that classification by the older generation, and positively, as a sign of solidarity or a compliment amongst members of the same in-group by the younger generation. The factors found to affect the result of the use of this term are the cultural stereotype that the user attaches to the meaning and the cultural understanding of the listener.

1. Introduction

Australian slang is distinct from that used in many other varieties of English (with the exception of New Zealand slang, with which it shares many of the same slang terms). Although with the expansion of internationalism and international travel the slang of many other English cultures has influenced the slang used by the Australian population, strong ties still remain to Australian colloquialisms. Slang can be used as a way to build personal, social or national identity and to create solidarity within an in-group, which is evident in the use of Australian slang amongst its users (Laugesen 2003).

The use of Australian slang in other countries and therefore with people of other cultures can be either completely unrecognisable or strongly misinterpreted as being insults or even swearing (Menner 1946: 120). For example, a woman was recently questioned by the American police after she used the term 'fair dinkum' on an American airline, the term being assumed to be swearing (Rolfe 2007). This misunderstanding is an excellent example of the ways in which slang can carry strong cultural values which influence the meaning understood by the listener.

During World War I, a glossary of 'slanguage' used by the Australian soldiers was created to take a snapshot in history of Australian language and slang (Laugesen 2003). The words used by soldiers were written down with very

brief definitions and at times possible origins. One entry that is relevant to this research is the term 'bastard'. This term originated as a derogatory title for a child born to unmarried parents, whereas the entry in the 'slanguage' glossary describes it as "a term of endearment" (Laugesen 2007). It can therefore be seen that a word with originally negative connotations can be used in a positive way if used as a type of slang.

2. Methodology: Ethnopragmatic analysis

A small corpus was built of Australian English slang from internet resources, mainly online newspapers and comments made about these articles from archives of the past five years, then samples of approximately one sentence were taken that included the term 'bogan'. A sample of sentences that contained the word 'bogan' was selected from the corpus (see Appendix 1).

In addition, three ethno pragmatic interviews were conducted with Australian English speakers to support the written data. These interviews were recorded and then transcribed by the researcher. The ethno-pragmatic interviews were conducted with four Anglo-Saxon Australian-born people of varying ages from 18-52 years old who were asked a number of questions regarding their understanding and personal use of the word 'bogan' (see full transcriptions of the interviews in Appendix 2).

The Natural Semantic Meta-language was then used to create a semantic explication of 'bogan' in AusE. The study focused mainly on looking at whether this term is used in a derogatory way and what effects the cultural values of the term have on (im)politeness.

The analysis of each section of the data was conducted separately in order to appreciate the different uses and implications of the term in its separate environments.

3. Discussion of print data

By looking at the data collected from the interviews and online dictionary entries, the term describes a person of unspecified gender who can be associated with the following list of personal qualities: enthusiasm for cars and 'hooning'; drinking alcohol (specifically a cheap beer like Victorian Bitter); a lack of education; dirty personal hygiene habits; and low dress standards such as thongs, flannel shirts, wife beaters (singlets); smoking; lack of money; loud rock or heavy metal music; the 'mullet' hair style; petty crime; free-loading; reckless behaviour; and Australia.

From the analysis carried out on the corpus and sample, it has been concluded that the term 'bogan' is predominantly used as a gender-neutral noun (www.bogan.com.au). The use of the term 'bogan' in any other linguistic form is rare and possibly due to linguistic and social evolution. 'Bogan' has circulated in

mainstream society since the 1980s and some believe that it has its origins on the Bogan River District of Western NSW, though this link can not be confirmed (www.bogan.com.au). The current understanding of the term has evolved only slightly from its original meaning, derived in the eighties, possibly due to being strongly embedded in Australian society.

Regarding the question of whether the term is used to cause offence, the majority of the printed data seems to lean towards the use of the word as an insult. Most of the written data focused on the offensive side of the use of the word 'bogan' and how the term can be associated with derogatory taunts about Australian culture being that of unintelligent people with little to no personal pride. However, this negative use cannot be concluded as being the only version, since there are a few examples in the written texts that indicate a positive attitude towards those who are stereotyped as being 'bogans'. This is shown by the discussion of 'pride' being associated with the term and supporting the traditional 'Aussie' culture in articles like that by Michelle Griffin in *The Australian* of 15 July 2002. Griffin discusses the fact that 'bogan' is no longer just being used as an insult, but is in fact a way to identify with the 'Aussie' culture that many Anglo-Saxon Australian citizens are so proud of.

This opinion conflicts with the embarrassment of the 'bogan' persona as described by Campbell (2006). She suggests that the celebrities described in the media as 'bogans' are a reason behind the negative assertion of the term rather than the common/public use of the word. This is supported by the use of the term 'bogan' to describe celebrities such as Shane Warne who have been shamed publicly for their infidelity and philandering, excessive alcohol consumption and other undesired habits (Symons 2005).

The term 'bogan' is associated with translations into North-American English of 'trailer trash' and British English 'CHAV'S' (Huynh 2007). This translation into the North-American English 'trailer-trash' is interesting since one of the articles relates the negative outlook of this word to a similar perspective on the term 'bogan'. Another of the articles insists that 'Australians have an affection for bogans that is not reflected in North America's loathing of trailer trash' (Huynh 2007). Therefore, it cannot be definitively said whether this word invokes a positive or a negative stereotype from analysis of the written data.

4. Discussion of interview data

The general understanding of the term 'bogan', as described by the interview participants, is that of a person with a lack of pride for their personal appearance, who is untidy and poorly dressed. The two older participants included having a lower than normal intellectual level as being an important mental characteristic of being a 'bogan', whereas the younger participant disagreed with this idea. She described a 'bogan' as being someone who 'plays dumb' but who is not actually unintelligent. However, this could be a biased opinion since she continues after

this comment to classify herself as a 'bogan' and therefore attempts to create a positive image of her now self-proclaimed in-group. Since the older participants have either explicitly or implicitly excluded themselves from the 'bogan' in-group, they distance themselves from the negative stereotype of this identity.

All of the participants supported the idea that the term is generally used by a younger speaker rather than a middle-aged or older speaker. However, once again, the youngest speaker had more to add on this point, saying that she would use the term with family and friends including with her maternal grandmother. She justifies this by saying that her grandma 'is completely different though', indicating that she does not classify her grandmother as a 'typical' grandmother. This shows that although she may use the term with her own grandmother, this is an exception to the social norm for the use of the term. This could indicate a meaning shift from one generation to the next. Since both of the older participants commented on the fact that they do not use it, and the younger participant does, this situation might arise with a term or phrase that was at one time derogatory but is in the present neutral or complimentary, as discussed in the introduction to this essay.

All interview participants had the same opinion that the word is generally not offensive. However, the older male participant said that he would question why a person would call him that, indicating slight offence of the word when the term is being directed towards him. This offence is created by the disagreement between the projection of the stereotype onto a person who does not identify with that stereotype. It is not that the stereotype itself is an offensive description; rather that the person who is being publicly classified as a 'bogan' does not appreciate being identified in a way that they do not classify themselves.

The youngest participant made the interesting comment that it is mainly offensive for females to be called a 'bogan' but that it can be taken as a compliment if it is directed towards a male. This can be understood by looking at the social ideology of men, that is that the term supports the tough or strong aspect of male psychology along with the belief that males should not care about their personal appearance. For a female to be identified with a term that has strong masculine connotations would be offensive if she did not see herself in that way.

5. Semantic explication of 'bogan'

From the preceding analysis we can define the use of *bogan* in Australian English in the following manner using the Natural Semantic Metalanguage:

this is a kind of person

this person is not like me

it is not bad if this person thinks I don't like them

this person can think like this:

I think it is not bad if someone thinks of me in a bad way

I don't have to do anything to be good at this
I feel good because of this

6. Conclusion

'Bogan' is described as 'a subculture' or an 'abstract idea that is expressed through culture' so the word can be assumed to be explicitly linked to culture (Campbell 2006). The (im)politeness that can be incurred is therefore associated to the cultural ties that each individual user attaches to the term not the meaning of the word itself.

Therefore, it can be concluded from analysis of the data of this research that the term 'bogan' can be used as either a derogatory term or a compliment to create solidarity. The factor that determines this decision is whether the person who is being called a 'bogan' identifies with the cultural stereotype or not. If the person does not classify him or herself as a part of this in-group than offence can be taken whereas if the person sees him or herself as part of the in-group then the comment will be seen more like a compliment.

The term is most commonly used by the younger generation in today's society. This can be attributed to the fact that the understanding or connotations of the word has changed since its original meaning. A person who belongs to an older generation views this word as an impolite projection of an identity onto a person who does not agree with the classification. However, a person of a younger generation is more likely to accept the use of this address as compliment to create solidarity amongst the members of the same in-group.

Research should be continued into the area of (im)politeness in Australian slang and simply Australian slang on its own since there is very little literature on these topics. The changing nature of the spoken language, in particular slang, means that if research is not continually conducted in this area, much of the information will be lost.

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Appendix 1: Samples of 'bogan' in Australian English

In New Zealand as in Australia, **bogan** is an insulting slang, term for an unsophisticated lower-class yob - if the study is published in the United States it may have to include the translation 'trailer trash'. (*The Australian* 2007)

But Mr Snell is happy to describe himself as a **bogan**, saying he loves heavy metal music - distinctive for its thick, loud, guitar-and-drums sound. (*The Australian* 2007)

'The stereotype of a **bogan** is tight black jeans, a Metallica T-shirt, a mullet 12 or a shaved head and a love of beer and cars. I'd very proudly call myself a **bogan**,' he said on Radio New Zealand today. (*The Australian* 2007)

G'DAY, keep your trackies on, chuck a sickie and jump in the ute, you **bogan**. (Conway 2006)

Aussies might still regard Microsoft billionaire Bill Gates as a geek, but surely he's no **bogan**. (Conway, Nov 13, 2006)

'Over here they are either **bogan** Crows supporters or **bogan** Port supporters.' (Pearce in *Quartermaine* 2006)

'I might get 30,000 dirty looks from the **bogans** here today, but I got one high five from another Freo fan so that made it worthwhile.' (Pearce in *Quartermaine* 2006)

Warne receives regular ribbings from the Australian media for his **bogan** persona. His struggles with weight loss and cigarettes, the unsophisticated dietary habits, are all fodder for commentators who recoil at his uncouth habits. But Warney is the ultimate Aussie bloke: all brawn and few brains when it comes to controlling his appetites, plus a blinding addiction to blondes who are typically clones of his attractive wife. (Symons 2005)

'They're the same ones in English really, aren't they?' he says. 'I know the word **bogan**, but it's not really a swear word. There was **bogan** and there was another one Bevan? Bevan! Yeah, that's the other one.' (*The Sunday Mail* 2007)

Jeff of Qld you don't get the point. You're an ignoramus. Get educated because you sound like **bogan**. (Whittaker 2007)

Perhaps there's a little **bogan** in everyone (Campbell 2006)

Many Australians think they know exactly what a **bogan** is. Some say it's a socio-economic class. Some say **bogans** are a subculture. And others say that tastes or pop-cultural references make someone a **bogan**. (Campbell 2006)

Ultimately, **bogans** are none of these things. Rather than being grounded in reality, **bogan** is an abstract idea that is expressed through culture. And when we talk about **bogans**, we're really talking about national identity. (Campbell 2006)

Bogans pop up in the media and in the public imagination as figures that are both embarrassing and 'un-Australian', and instantly, recognisably 'hyper-Australian'. (Campbell 2006)

It suits the political ideology of the **bogan** to declare certain tastes - and people - 'lower class', because that makes it their fault and not ours. (Campbell 2006)

Bogans don't give a rat's arse about style or substance. Too lazy to read reviews, yet too ignorant to appreciate style, if you see a **Bogan** with a decent phone it's because they just mugged a Technosexual. If you keep watching, you'll see them throw it in the bin because they can't figure out the keylock. **Bogan's** phone of choice; whatever's on special at Cash Converters. (Turner 2007)

Will **bogans** decide the next election? (Huynh 2007)

Australians have an affection for **bogans** that is not reflected in North America's loathing of trailer trash or the Pommie repugnance towards CHAVs (Council Housing and Violent). (Huynh 2007)

Arch-conservatives bemoan the fact that people no longer know their place and equate the **bogan** ascendance with the demise of civilisation and the erosion of old-fashioned values. (Huynh 2007)

At the same time, **bogans** have only scorn for the out-of-touch intellectuals who they view as being bereft of the ANZAC spirit and obsessed with the esoteric arts of others. (Huynh 2007)

Thank God for that! Half the time I don't know what these half-literate **bogan**, bush pig expressions mean. They make us sound so cheap and uneducated. (Ferrer 2006)

I can not stand Australian sayings and **bogan** accents, Nothing worse, it does not take much more to speak correctly does it? Leave it to the **bogans** to carry on the 'tradition' (Mark M 2006)

Nothing is sacred with **Bogan** Daz and his mate Macca encouraging punters to cross off 'Keys to the Torana, 18' or a 'I thought she was legal, 15' on their way to bingo glory. (*The Penrith Press* 2007)

All nations have their equivalent of the **bogan**, and Europe - for all its suave sophistication, is no exception. (Kent 2007)

Looking like Noddy in his little red car, the Euro **Bogan** takes enormous pride in his bad-ass Smart Car and takes umbrage if you point and laugh because his speakers are bigger than his engine. (Kent 2007)

Although the moccasin-shod suburban hero has been off the cultural radar for the past decade while Australians flirted with imported subcultures, the **bogan** is BIT - back in town - and this time, people are embracing their inner **bogan**. (Griffin 2002)

From Russell Crowe demanding VB tinnies after the Oscars, to hairdressers reviving the mini mullet, the **bogan** is commanding newfound respect. (Griffin 2002)

But in the past couple of years, she's seen a real resurgence in **bogan** pride. (Griffin 2002)

The word '**bogan**' first appeared in surfing magazines in the early 80s as a derogatory term for the inland suburban outsiders who invaded the surfers' patch. (Griffin 2002)

But it's not always an insult anymore. Both Triple M and Triple J organised national **bogan** competitions in the past six months, and they've been flooded with entries from people proud to wave the flannelette flag. (Griffin 121 2002)

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Appendix 2: Transcriptions of ethnopragmatic interviews

Interview with Australian female (45 years old), 21 October 2007

I = Interviewer

G = interviewee

- I: Please describe to me the meaning of the term bogan in your own words
- G: A boga::n i::s a:: (3.0) flannelette shirt wearing ugg boot (2.0) aaah:: usually younger guy sort of under (2.0) from about oh 18 to 30 years old, um:: used to live in, someone who used to live in the Western suburbs of Sydney. Um:: They're (3sec) They own (2.0) Holdens and:: old Holdens and Fords (1.0) Falcon Ute sort of things and::
- I: Are there any mental characteristics you associate with bogan?
- G: (2.0) I associate a lower IQ than normal (laughter) um:: low socio-economic sort of (1.0) upbringing (2.0) um::
- I: [Okay]
- G: [That's] probably all.
- I: Do you use the term yourself?
- G: (1.0) Not a lot, no not very often at all
- I: Um:: is that, do you think that's because of your age.
- G: [No, I just think that's just]
- I: [Or do you think that's just]
- G: It's just me and I don't use that term (1.0) a lot
- I: (2.0) Um:: is this term offensive?
- G: (3.0) No I don't think it can, it is, it depends on who, who:: like when it's used. Like any term. Um, sometimes they're offensive if they're used in the wrong way. But (1.0) so many people refer to bogans in:: Australia that it's almost a:: um:: (3.0) compliment to some people.
- I: So (1.0) um:: would it be seen as offensive outside Australia? Or do you think it could be seen as offensive?
- G: (2.0) They mightn't know what it means (1.0) if they, if they knew what it sort of referred to then possibly people could think that it could be offensive.
- I: Ah (1.0) Um:: Can you describe to me a situation when this term could be seen as impolite.
- G: (3.0) Oh god um:: (3.0) If you used it in:: (3.0) upper society they'd probably take it as an insult (1.0) [At the]=
- I: [so::]
- G: =At the you know Spring Carnival races or something and, and you spoke about Lady or Lord So-and-So being a bogan then yes maybe they, they would take it as offensive.
- I: So in like general socio-economic areas, in normal, well in average socio-economic areas it'd be ok to use it or?
- G: I think most places they'd they'd accept it yes apart from the (2.0) the:: snobby-er people I'd say.
- I: Ok, that's it.

NB. Discussed later: there is no female bogan, just the girl that is with the bogan.

Interview with Australian male (52 years old), 21 October 2007

I = Interviewer

M = interviewee

- I: Please describe to me the term bogan in your own words. (2.0) or the characteristics the bogan, that a bogan has.
- M: (3.0) My:: thoughts of what a bogan is, is:: that it's a person who:: is perhaps ah:: a little bit untidy, unkept. Um:: not necessarily an educated person, and perhaps a little bit(1.0) oh maybe wears daggy clothes and and stuff.
- I: (2.0) [um::]
- M: [That's it]
- I: Any specific physical or mental characteristics apart from being uneducated? Is there any places where they typically come from?
- M: (2.0) Mm:: I couldn't really answer that. I don't really know. They possibly come, I don't know. They probably come from normal homes. You know just (2.0) unkept people who look a little bit untidy.
- I: Yep. Um:: Is there any difference between a male bogan and a female bogan?
- M: I really wouldn't know the difference apart from gender.
- I: (unintelligible)
- M: Not really
- I: Just the stereotype of the type of person?
- M: Mm
- I: Ok. Do you use this term yourself?
- M: No, not really
- I: Ok. Would you think this term is offensive? (3.0) And if so, who would it be offensive to?
- M: No, I don't think it's offensive. Um:: Maybe if you called a person a bogan to their face they may take offence because you may be um:: stereotyping them into a category that they don't feel they are.
- I: Um:: Do, Would you be offended if someone called you a bogan?
- M: (2.0) Not really, knowing the meaning of what a bogan is. I don't think I would be offended. I would question why they'd call me that.
- I: You don't think you're a bogan?
- M: I don't think I'm a bogan.
- I: Ok. Um:: Can you describe a situation that this term could be seen as impolite.
- M: (3.0) Um:: Perhaps at a social greet, ah, social meeting where ah:: you're out having a few drinks and someone doesn't necessarily appeal to you and you call them a bogan to their face and maybe they're not. They maybe just a (1.0) you know a style of dress or:: perhaps maybe an unshaven look or:: or whatever but yeah just calling a person a bogan, a bogan when they're not really.

- I: Do you think that it, um:: the term is used by a particular age or type of person.
- M: (1.0) Um:: I think that perhaps younger people than myself would use the word more often. I think ah:: that maybe teenage to early twenties might use (1.0) the, the term more often than perhaps my age group.
- I: Um: is there any social situation where you think that it would be completely ok to (unintelligible)
- M: Perhaps in a um:: environment like Fortitude Valley where you have a ah:: a different (2.0) lifestyle or type of people there. Um:: you know in Deagon for example you've got a an older age group ah where as the:: the Valley you have a, a cross section of different ah lifestyles and what have you. Perhaps there is might be more acceptable to use the term.
- I: Ok. That sounds pretty good. Thank you.

Interview with Australian female (18 years old), 21 October 2007

I = Interviewer

R = interviewee

- I: Please describe to me the meaning of the term bogan in your own words.
- R: Um. Bogan is a:: common (1.0) term used in Australia for:: a rough (1.0) kid I guess.
- I: [Ah::]
- R: [Someone] who's a bit of a::: (laughter) (unintelligible)
- [Pause in recording to recompose]
- I: Ok. Describe the word bogan.
- R: Slob. That's pretty much it.
- I: Is there any other physical or mental characteristics that you can associate with the word bogan? Or with a bogan?
- R: Bogan. (2.0)
- I: Are they clean?
- R: No. No, they look a bit rough around the edges, a bit trashy, but, (2.0) sometimes they can be funny and, it's not a it, it. Bogan isn't a person. Bogan's just a term used when someone's being a bogan.
- I: So it's a style. It's a style of clothing. [Is it a style of clothing or is it a personality?]
- R: [It's a style, it's a word used to] (4.0) It's not a personality, oh it can be a personality. It's a style. No, not generally.=
- I: =What does a bogan wear?
- R: It doesn't matter what they wear, a bogan (0.5) is just a slob. It's like it's trackies and a shirt or something.=
- I: =Trackies and a shirt. Ok. Um, what do bogans do? Is there anything you=
- R: =boganish um::=
- I: Is it, what is boganish?
- R: Boganish? Mm:: when people just slop around and they don't really care.

- I: So they don't (0.5) really care about their personal opinion, ah appearance or what people think of them. Are [they smart?]
- R: They're down to earth! That's what a bogan is! Down to earth.
- I: Are they smart? Or are they dumb? Or.
- R: (2.0) Um:: Bit of both. They play dumb, but I reckon bogans are usually smart because I'm bogan myself.
- I: Um. So do you use the term yourself then? Obviously.
- R: Yes. I use it for 'hilarity'. Like if a girl gets dressed up and goes out for a night on the town and she's all glammed up, I'm like, 'You look like a bogan' and (1.0) it really like (0.5) insults but I do it for (0.5) humour rather than
- I: Offence.
- R: Offence. That's right.
- I: Ok. Who do you use the term with? Is it with friends? (1.0) Family?
- R: Oh friends:: family. [Occas...]
- I: [Do you use it] at work?
- R: At work?
- I: Yep.
- R: Definitely not. (laughter) [Um::]
- I: So it's something you would use with people your own age or older.
- R: (1.0) Socially.
- I: Ok. Would you use it with Grandma?
- R: Um:: Yes, because our Grandma's completely different though.
- I: Ok. Can you describe to me a situation when this term could be seen as impolite.
- R: Um:: (2.0) No, I can't, can't think of one sorry.
- I: So, it's always ok?
- R: For me, yes. I wouldn't be able to say it was offens..
- I: So, you wouldn't be offended by it =
- R: =No =
- I: =if someone calls you a bogan.
- R: No
- I: So, the term is not offensive in any way (0.5) to you (0.5) or can you see how people would see it as offensive.
- R: I'm sure people get offended. Like girls.
- I: But mainly girls would get offended but boys would take it as a compliment?
- R: Possibly, yeah.
- I: Ok. Anything else you'd like to say about the word bogan?
- R: (Unintelligible)

(END OF TRANSCRIPTS)