

1995

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Recommended Citation

Krantz, Susan E. "Reconsidering the Etymology of Bulldike." *American Speech: A Quarterly of Linguistic Usage* 70.2 (1995): 217-221.

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RESPONSE

RECONSIDERING THE ETYMOLOGY OF *BULLDIKE*

IN THIS JOURNAL IN 1985, Richard Spears defended the etymological designation “of obscure origin” appearing in the *OED* for the slang term *dike* or *dyke*, meaning ‘lesbian’ or ‘masculine woman’ taking particular issue with Archibald Hill’s contention (1982) that the term derives from *hermaphrodite* > *morphodite* > *morphodyke*.¹ Over a decade earlier, Peter Tamony, in his self-published collection of *Americanisms*, also rejected the *hermaphrodite* derivation and offered the possibility that *dike* ‘lesbian’ derives from the Hans Brinker story: “It is in this physical action and contact—the finger in the hole . . . that is the allusion in *dike*, a lesbian” (1–3). Although he does not pursue the matter, Tamony claims that “the compound *bulldiker* seems to stem from the adjectival use of *bull* and *ram* as intensifiers among West Indians” (6). Tamony’s speculations are problematic on several scores, the most notable being that the earliest printed references to lesbians as “dikes” (both from 1926 novels) use the combined form, one as a noun and one as an adjective: *bulldiker* (Carl Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*, New York: Grosset, 1926, 12, 285) and *bulldycking* (Claude McKay, *Home to Harlem*, New York: Harper, 36). It is not until five years and several printed references later that the clipped form *dike* appears (see Spears 1985, 320 and Tamony 1972, 2: 8). Moreover, if *bull* serves as an intensifier (based no doubt on its connotations of strength connected with the bovine male), Tamony makes no effort to explain its usage in connection with the Hans Brinker story.

Most of Spears’s alternate etymological offerings posit *bulldike*, *bulldiker*, *bulldikker* as the full form and *dike* as the synonymous clipped form. Among his more likely suggestions are the metaphoric application of *dike* (without special reference to the Hans Brinker story) as ‘ditch or trench’ (*OED*) to the female anatomy (see also Farmer and Henley 1890–1904) and the alternative possibility that *dike* is a shortened form of *diked out*, used to describe ‘a man in full dress’ (*DAE*). Spears recognizes the apparent redundancy in definition caused by this etymology (i.e., *bulldike* ‘masculine/mannish man in full dress’): “It is possible that the ‘overdressed’ notion implies effeminacy, and *bull* redirects that to the idea of power and aggression” (323).

In these, as in most of Spears’s possibilities, an unstated, underlying assumption appears to be that the two elements of the compound agree syntactically with their definition, so that *bull* = ‘masculine’ and *dike* = ‘woman’. Under this assumption, there is no need to consider the first half of the term, since *bull* meaning ‘male’ (as in *bullcalf*) or meaning ‘masculine’ in terms of strength or size (as in *bullfrog* or *bull-necked*) is common-

place usage. However, the possibility noted above exemplifies the primary problem in assuming that *bull* in the combined form originated from the bovine male and denotes masculinity. Just as the first element, *bull* of *bulldike*, causes redundancy of definition should the second element, *dike*, be a shortened form of *diked out*, so, too, does the *bull* in related variants prove redundant. This is the case with Rodgers's attestation (1972) that *bulldicker* is used to describe a woman with a clitoris extended enough to serve as a penis in lesbian relationships. Anatomically unusual though such cases are, *clitoris* as 'dick' makes sense and has been associated with the penis for quite some time. The seventeenth-century midwife, Mrs. Jane Sharp, uses the contemporary term *yard* 'penis' to describe the clitoris in such lesbian relationships, although she remains skeptical: "yet sometimes it hangs forth at the slit like a Yard . . . and some lewd women have attempted to use it as men do theirs . . . but I never heard but of one in this country" (qtd. in Eccles 1982, 34). More recently, a 1920s jazz tune about lesbianism was called "The Boy in the Boat," the "boy" being the clitoris.² However sensible *clitoris* as 'dick' may be, the extended clitoris as a more manly or stronger or larger 'dick' is not. The same is, of course, true of the variant *bulldagger* if we accept Rodgers's suggestion that *dagger* is a phallic nickname.

Despite its more immediate associations with masculinity, the *bull* in *bulldike* may not be etymologically related to the bovine male. From the Middle Ages to the present on both sides of the Atlantic, *bull* is used to imply jest or falsehood. The *OED* also lists *bull* as "of unknown origin" and asks its readers to compare the Old French *boul*, *boule*, *bole* 'fraud, deceit, trickery' as well as the Middle English *bull* 'falsehood'. It is under this general category that the American slang *bull* 'untruthful talk' appears (popularly associated with *bullshit* but, I would note, probably not etymologically related to the bovine male except through usage and shifting associations). (See *RHD*, which suggests Medieval Latin *bullā* meaning jest as an intermediary term, and Morris and Morris 1971; Farmer and Henley 1890–1904 trace the use of *bull* in British slang through the nineteenth century from the Middle English *bull*.) The adjectival use of the noun in a combined form appears in England before the close of the seventeenth century in the terms *bull-head* and *bull-tour*, two terms for 'false Hair worn (formerly much) by Women' (E. B. c. 1700).³ In America today, among the more common usages of *bull* etymologically related to the French *boule* in a combined form is *bull session*.⁴ The use of *bull* as falsehood entered the American vernacular in the mid-1920s around the same time that *bulldiker* and *bulldicking* first appear in print. Wentworth and Flexner (1975) note the use of *bull* and *bull session* in Percy Marks, *Plastic Age* (New York: Grosset,

1924, 48, 77). The mid-twenties' popularity of the term *bull* in America may indicate that it, like so much else, made its transatlantic crossing with American troops returning from Europe after World War I, although the term existed in much more limited use by students slightly earlier (Wentworth and Flexner 1975). Regardless of its etymology, it had, by the time of the first recorded use of *bulldike*, become a popular slang term.

If *bull* as falsehood is the term that informs *bulldike*, the problem of redundancy in definition is eliminated, but a new possibility emerges. Could *dike* be a variant of *dick*, in which case *bulldike* could be defined as 'fake penis', a derogatory but logical synecdochic expression for a mannish lesbian? As noted previously, one of the two earliest written examples of the term is the adjectival form *bulldycking*. Two other variant forms are *bulldikker* (Berrey and Van den Bark 1942) and *bull dicker* (Rodgers 1972), indicating an [ɪ] in pronunciation. The exchange of vowel sounds could indicate the creation of euphemism (as in *god* to *gad*, *shit* to *shoot*). Partridge (1970) believes that a similar phenomenon created the popular British slang term *poof* meaning gay man, the original term having been *puff* (1870s). Thus, although the diphthongal pronunciation of *i* is currently the more popular, it need not be the original.

In short, the original term for masculine lesbian could have been *bulldicker* or *bulldick*, either specifically meaning 'fake penis' or, more innocuously but still to the point, 'false man'. Although the earliest listing of *dick* as 'penis' is Farmer and Henley (1891), the term has been used generically to mean 'man' since the 1500s, just as *Nell* indicated the generic female. Currently, one label for the feminine male homosexual, the *Nellie* (sometimes spelled *Nelly*), derives from inverting the gender associated with the generic name. Perhaps what works for *Nellie* works for *Dick*.

The synonymous term *bulldagger* may also have originated as a euphemistic metaphor in which the first element means 'false' rather than 'male.' Although *dagger*, like *dike*, is also a term "of obscure origin," its definition in this combined form probably derives from the similarities of the dagger's shape and function to the male sexual organ, and it only makes sense metaphorically as the vehicle for the tenor 'lesbian' if we assume that a woman who has sexual relations with another woman wants a dagger (i.e., penis). The earliest recorded use of *dagger* I found appears in Henry Knighton's account of an incident that occurred at a tournament in 1348:

a band of women would come as if to share the sport, dressed in divers and marvelous dresses of men. . . . Thither they came in party-coloured tunics . . . with short hoods that had pendants like ropes wound round their necks, and belts thickly studded with gold and silver—nay, they even wore, in pouches slung across

their bodies, those knives which are called daggers in the vulgar tongue. [Qtd. and trans. Coulton 1939: 493]⁵

Knighton, if we can judge by his interjection and intensifier, “NAY, they EVEN wore” (emphasis mine), finds the strapping on of daggers the most transgressive aspect of the transvestite costume he describes. Could these “masculinized” women come to be known by their most bizarre accoutrement, the dagger?

All of this, of course, is highly speculative; however, there remains the very real possibility that the current assumptions about the etymology of the *bull* in *bulldike* result from catachresis. Because the associations of the homonymous term *bull* with strength and maleness are so common and because those associations suit the definition connotatively, the likelihood of the catachrestic shift is intensified. Although the facts of the phrase’s origin may demand a drastically different denotation from the popular preception, the substitution of the more common term affords a connotatively similar sense. The derogatory label works either way: any woman perceived to want a penis is also perceived as mannish.

Regardless of the etymology, the definition of the term has changed further. Dropping the *bull* and its associations with maleness, the lesbian community has transformed the derogatory *dike* into a positive identifier to be used within the community to signify toughness and assertiveness or simply as a generic term for all lesbians. In this sense, then, the term has acquired a new linguistic integrity—*dike* is no longer a clipped form that has the same meaning as its full form.

NOTES

I would like to thank my colleague Miriam Youngerman Miller for her generous advice and suggestions on this article.

1. Contemporary and subsequent to Spears’s article are several works worth noting that deal directly with the subject. The first, Grahn (1984), searches for celebratory “etymological” myths for gay words and claims that *dike* may come from “Dike (‘natural justice’) . . . a goddess of Greece whose female companion was Truth, Alethia” (306) or, alternately, that *bulldike* may derive from an ancient Celtic Queen, Boadicea (136–46). Dynes (1987) rightly calls Grahn’s etymology an “absurd derivation.” In an earlier work, Dynes (1985) does not take into account the work appearing in *American Speech* and adds no new insight into the etymological mystery of *dike*.

2. Tamony mentions “The Boy in the Boat” in this context. Recorded circa 1930, it has been reissued by Stash (ST-106) on an album entitled *AC-DC Blues: Gay Jazz Reissues*, vol. 1 (1977).

3. Haliwell (1847) also lists *bull-heads*. His definition, “the curled tufts of hair in the forehead of a woman,” omits the word *false*, but the definition is clearly derivative. It could be that Haliwell, himself, has moved the hair to the forehead in

his definition in an attempt to make sense of the term *bull*. Or, he might simply not have deemed it necessary to include the aspect of falseness in his definition, simply assuming that his readers would know that the “tufts” were removable.

4. Interestingly, the associations with the masculine and/or the bovine male intrude into these usages of *bull* to mean ‘falsehood’. The *OED*, although it, like Morris and Morris (1971), connects the US slang *bull* (‘trivial, insincere, or untruthful talk or writing; nonsense’) with the French *boule*, somehow accepts a blending of ‘untruthful talk’ with ‘masculine’ in *bull session* ‘an informal conversation or discussion, esp. of a group of males’.

5. The earliest use of *dagger* the *OED* lists is from the Latin *Fragmenta Vestusta* of c. 1375.

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