

Stefania Nuccorini\*

*‘Words of caution’:  
usage labels and negative connotation  
in Learner’s Dictionaries*

1. *Introduction: usage labels in monolingual English Dictionaries*

The history of usage labels, according to Béjoint (2023: 16), «mirrors the history of Dictionaries». Indeed, usage labels, defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary online (OEDO)*<sup>1</sup> (s.v. usage label) as «(in lexicography) labels denoting the register, subject area, or other specific application of a word or phrase», have long been present in monolingual English lexicography, starting with the publication of several dictionaries of ‘hard words’<sup>2</sup>, that is to say words difficult to understand<sup>3</sup>. Significantly, however, according to Landau (1989: 195) Edward Phillips was the first to compile «a list of hard words to be used warily, and upon occasion only, or totally to be rejected as Barbarous»<sup>4</sup>, and included it in the Appendix to the 1678 edition of his *New World of English Words* (1658). The words in the list included, for example, «*circumbilivagation* (a going around)» or «*cynarctomachy* (a Bear-baiting)», and were «prefixed by a dagger symbol as a warning to the dictionary user». This ‘device’ marked «the beginning of a clear prescriptive tradition in the English monolingual dictionary» (Osselton, 2009: 144).

\* Università degli Studi Roma Tre.

<sup>1</sup> <<https://www.oed.com>>

<sup>2</sup> Robert Cawdrey, *Table Alphabetical* (1604); John Bullokar, *An English Expositor* (1616); Henry Cockeram, *The English Dictionarie*; Thomas Blount, *Glossographia* (1656).

<sup>3</sup> «Hard words were seen as those which were borrowed from Latin, Greek, or other languages». «The most familiar contemporaneous designation was that they were ink-horn terms» (McConchie, 2020: 105).

<sup>4</sup> In Phillips’ dictionary *Barbarous* is not used as a label: six examples concern ancient mythology, and only once is the adjective used as a ‘hard word’ in «barbarous manner».

As the examples above show, the adjective ‘barbarous’ was then still used in the 1526 sense of «not Greek nor Latin; hence, not classical, or pure» (*OEDO*), but also, starting at roughly the same time (1538), as «uncultured, uncivilized, unpolished; rude, rough, wild, savage. (Said of persons, their manners, customs, products: the usual opposite of *civilized*)» (*OEDO, Historical Thesaurus*)<sup>5</sup>. Alongside his prescriptive statement, i.e., «totally to be rejected», Phillips’s recommendation «to be used warily» can be seen as a warning label, in part a precursor of the explicit, much more recent usage labels in *Learner’s Dictionaries (LDs)* which are specifically meant to alert users to the restrictions on the use of words that convey a negative attitude.

According to Cassidy (1997: 103) «there was no real innovation in English dictionaries until 1721 with Nathan Bailey’s *Universal Etymological English Dictionary*». Indeed, Bailey too «employed a symbol to distinguish questionable usages from standard ones» (Landau, 1989: 195) in the 1727 supplementary volume to his 1721 *Dictionary*. That symbol, a double vertical bar, is shown at the end of the list of *Abbreviations* accompanied by the following definition: «before a word denoteth it to be bad»<sup>6</sup>. Notably, in the dictionary, *barbarous* is defined as «cruel, fierce, rude, wild, improper or broken, as to speech»<sup>7</sup>.

‘Questionable usages’ soon became associated with offensive and taboo words. Johnson included warnings or brief notations such as «low, barbarous, cant, ludicrous or coarse» in his 1755 *Dictionary* (see note 7), but not as «marks of distinction» or «notes of infamy» for what he called «low words»: he preferred to «put in verbal comments on individual words» (Osselson, 2009: 144), as testified to by the following *OEDO* quotation in the entry *barbarous* (which also shows the ‘variation’ in the adjective use) from Johnson’s *Rambler*: «some part of their [the ancient] superiority may be justly ascribed to the graces of their language, from which [Latin] the most polished of the present European tongues are nothing more than barbarous degenerations»<sup>8</sup>. Johnson also

<sup>5</sup> <<https://www.oed.com/search/advanced/ Meanings?testTermText0=barbarous&textTermOptO =WordPhrase>>.

<sup>6</sup> <<https://archive.org/details/universaletymolo00bail/page/12/mode/2up>>

<sup>7</sup> In Bayley’s 1721 dictionary there are eight occurrences of ‘barbarous’: three of them refer respectively to «rude or wild people», to «cruel» and to «manner». Johnson used the same examples alongside a few more, among which «barbarous usage» in his 1755 (1773) *Dictionary of the English Language*. London, W. Strahan.

<sup>8</sup> S. Johnson, *Rambler* No. 169. 29 October 1751. *OEDO*, s.v. *barbarous* (Quotations).

used fifty-three usage labels (Cassidy, 1997: 105-106)<sup>9</sup> and defined the most frequent ones in their senses referring to literature. His dictionary is «often regarded as the first to have delivered prescriptive judgements on usage, branding words as 'low', 'barbarous'<sup>10</sup>, 'despicable', 'ludicrous', 'mean', 'vulgar', etc.» (Brewer, 2016: 489), (and putting into words Phillips' dagger).

Only much later did Murray, the first editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), avoid «Johnson's bad, barbarous, corrupt, low, vulgar» («a deluge of labels» in Béjoint's words, 2023: 8) in favour of «error, informal, prop(erly)». The other editors of the *OED*'s first edition also «held to this objective pattern of labelling to the last volume (1928) and the Supplement (1933)» (Cassidy, 1997: 110), thus moving away from prescriptive judgements on usage. The *OED* did indeed play «a crucial role as the forerunner of descriptive lexicography» (Brewer, 2016: 490). Burchfield, the editor of the four *Supplements* (1986) to the first edition of the *OED*, wondered if there is «such a thing as merely descriptive lexicography which does not imply something of the prescriptive» (1975: 358). As the editor of the third edition of *Fowler's Modern English Usage* he stated that «there is no clear boundary between the doctrines of prescriptivism and those of descriptivism: much more an attitude of mind» (1996: 619-620). However, he did use status labels. Brewer (2005: 263) lamented that «nowhere are we provided with a list of status labels» in any edition of the *OED* (*status label* itself is not included in the *OED*), neither is «an explanation of how they are applied and what they mean». After some fifteen years, twenty-two register labels, which «indicate typical usage», are listed, accompanied by explanations, in the *Labelling our datasets* page of the *Oxford Languages* website<sup>11</sup>. The list includes the following labels which carry a negative connotation as clearly shown in the accompanying notes:

- *derogatory*: people use words that are derogatory to be deliberately critical or insulting.

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<sup>9</sup> Cassidy (1997: 110) credits H.B. Allen with the list taken from his 1940 unpublished PhD dissertation (Michigan) on *Samuel Johnson and the Authoritarian Principle in Linguistic Criticism*.

<sup>10</sup> Actually, 'barbarous' had already been used, as just seen.

<sup>11</sup> «*Oxford Languages* datasets have defined sets of labels to help our users to understand the full context of the word, such as where the word is spoken and in which situations it is usually used» <https://languages.oup.com/about-us/labelling-our-datasets/>

- *offensive*: language that is likely to cause offence, whether the speaker intends it or not. Offensive words usually relate to things like gender, sexuality, race, or disability, which are inborn and can't be changed. Using offensive words is regarded as unacceptable.
- *vulgar slang*: crude words used for body parts, bodily functions (such as going to the toilet), and things to do with sex. It's not considered polite to use these words, so you would probably only use them with your partner or close friends. Some vulgar words are swear words.

Different labels are often listed in the metadata of entry words, of the definitions and of the quotations in which they are used. For example, in the entry *usage* there are only two labels, *archaic* and *historical*, while the labels (and the number of their occurrences) used in the definitions which include the word *usage* are much more numerous<sup>12</sup>. Among them, only *derogatory*, *offensive*, and *depreciative* (which is not included in the list of register labels above) are indicative of a negative connotation. In that respect, other labels are also used, for example *coarse slang* (entry *to beast*) and *taboo*, «with reference to an expression or topic considered offensive and hence avoided or prohibited by social custom» (entry *taboo*): both clearly show a negative attitude (nota bene, neither is included in the list above). Some status labels (e.g., *colloq.*, *vulg.*) are included in the list of abbreviations viewable online; other labels (e.g., *coarse*, *low*), not being abbreviations, are not<sup>13</sup>.

Independently of descriptive/prescriptive labels, according to Cassidy «the labels in modern dictionaries are traffic signals. They tell us 'go slow' or 'caution' or 'stop'» (1997: 97). Not by chance, though with no specific reference to labels, Simpson, the editor of the second edition of the *OED* (1989), stated that «in Britain dictionaries monitor and describe the traffic of words» (2011: 33), since words «are on the move» (2011: 38), and he wondered «who is directing the traffic?» (2011: 40). He added that the *OED* is interested in observing and monitoring change but «does not set itself up as an authority». Most native speakers of English might not know who 'is directing the traffic' but they would be able «to get to their destinations in the end» (2011: 42).

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<sup>12</sup> colloquial and slang (289), derogatory (53), historical (49), offensive (40), depreciative (29), archaic (27), poetic and literary (7), euphemistic (6), humorous (5), irregular (5), ironic (3).

<sup>13</sup> <<https://www.oed.com/information/understanding-entries/abbreviations/?tl=true#v>>

How about learners of English as a foreign language? They would need some guidance as to what is, or is not, appropriate, especially in (their) productive activities. The following sections will analyse the usage labels «indicative of a 'negative' connotation» (Norri, 2000: 71), as applied in *LDs*. Offensive, derogative, or vulgar language is usually regarded as unacceptable: learners should be aware of the ascertained constraints on their use. In that respect, they need information about usage 'to get to their destinations'.

## 2. Usage labels and negative connotation in Learner's Dictionaries

Landau (1989: 175) categorised «the most common kinds of usage information given by general dictionaries, along with typical dictionary labels», as follows:

1. currency or temporality: *archaic, obsolete*
2. frequency of use: *rare*
3. regional or geographic variation: *US, British, Canadian, Australian*
4. technical or specialised terminology: *astronomy, chemistry, physics, etc.* these are called *field labels*
5. restricted or taboo usage: *vulgar, obscene*
6. insult: *offensive, disparaging, contemptuous*
7. slang: *slang*
8. style, functional variety or register: *informal, colloquial, literary, poetic, humorous*
9. status or cultural level: *nonstandard, substandard, illiterate*

Not all of Landau's labels have been systematically used in different dictionaries, and other labels have also been applied: for example, *historical, dated, old-fashioned, jocular, taboo, derogatory, pejorative*. Usually, each dictionary uses its own set of labels, and different dictionaries often share some labels from the same set, as will be seen, but it is worth noting that equally often the same label has been used in the literature in different ways. For example, for Landau *register* refers to style and the labels associated with it are *informal, colloquial, literary, poetic, humorous*, while for Jackson (1988: 268) «Biol., Chem., Mus., Naut.» are examples of *register labels*. 'Register' is also used in the *Oxford*

*Languages Datasets* (see note 11). However, the usage labels that will be analysed below provide «diasystematic information» about «restrictions and constraints on the use of certain words or senses in the contexts in which they occur» (Urbinc & Urbinc, 2015: 111). ‘Restriction’ is a word often used with reference to «limitations concerning the way words are to be used» (Stachurska, 2018: 90). As already seen, dictionaries have long included labels to give their users information about the contextual and pragmatic uses of ‘certain words’, and, as will be seen, *LDs* warn learners against using ‘those’ words. Labels reflect «a judgement about usage rather than a judgement about meaning» (Brewer, 2016: 492), and this is the stance usually adopted by *LDs*: their warning labels attached to words carrying a negative connotation «alert users that certain terms should not be uncritically employed in communication» (Namatende, 2011: 305), since «a person who uses them expresses a negative view of the referent» (Card *et al.*, 1984: 64).

The usage labels indicating a negative attitude are listed in the following (differently dated) printed editions of the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* (tenth edition, 2020) (*OALD*); the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (sixth edition, 2017) (*LDOCE*); the *COBUILD Advanced Learner’s English Dictionary* (ninth edition, 2018) (*COBUILD*); the *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* (fourth edition, 2013) (*CALD*)<sup>14</sup>.

Each label is defined and exemplified in *OALD*’s and *COBUILD*’s print editions, while *LDOCE* and *CALD* only include definitions. The same labels are used in their online editions (*OALDO*, *LDOCEO*, *COBUILD*, *CALDO*)<sup>15</sup>. Their schematic descriptions from print editions, and their definitions as entry words in online editions are given below in two different sections. The third section includes the definitions and the labels of the words given as examples in *OALDO* and *COBUILD*. A few comments will follow each section.

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<sup>14</sup> The labels used in the *Macmillan English Dictionary* are not mentioned because it would have been impossible to analyse their definitions from its online edition which unfortunately has no longer been available since the following official announcement: «Macmillan Education Ltd announces its decision to close the Macmillan English Dictionary, Macmillan English Thesaurus and MacmillanDictionary Blog websites on Friday 30th June» [2023]. The website is no longer available.

<sup>15</sup> *OALDO* (<<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com>>); *LDOCEO* (<<https://www.ldoceonline.com>>); *COBUILD* (<<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english>>); *CALDO* (<<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/learner-english>>).

## 2.1 Labels

### OALD

- *disapproving*: expressions that show that you feel disapproval or contempt, for example *blinkered*, *newfangled*.
- *offensive*: expressions that are used by some people to address or refer to people in a way that is very insulting, especially in connection with their race, religion, sex, or disabilities, for example *half-caste*, *slut*. You should not use these words.
- *slang*: very informal language, sometimes restricted to a particular group of people, for example people of the same age, or those who have the same interests or do the same job. Examples are *dingbat*, *dosh*.
- *taboo*: expressions that are likely to be thought by many people to be obscene or shocking. You should not use them. Examples are *bloody*, *shit*.

### LDOCE

- *disapproving*: a word that is used to show dislike or approval [*sic*], although this may not be clear from its meaning.
- *not polite*: considered rude and might offend some people.
- *taboo*: a word or phrase that should not be used because it is very rude or offensive.

### COBUILD

- *offensive*: likely to offend people, or to insult them: words labelled *offensive* should therefore be avoided, e.g. *cripple*.
- *rude*: used mainly to describe words which could be considered taboo by some people; words labelled *rude* should therefore usually be avoided, e.g. *bloody*.
- *very offensive*: highly likely to offend people, or to insult them; words labelled *very offensive* should be avoided, e.g. *wog*.
- *very rude*: used mainly to describe words which most people consider taboo; words labelled *very rude* should be avoided, e.g. *fuck*.

### CALD

- *disapproving*: used to express dislike or disagreement with someone or something.

- *offensive*: very rude and likely to offend people.
- *slang*: extremely informal language, used mainly by a particular group, especially young people.

As can be seen above, the label *disapproving*, as used in *OALD*, *LDOCE*, and *CALD*, is defined in slightly different ways; so is *offensive* in *OALD* and *COBUILD*, both of which give strong advice against the use of words so labelled. *CALD*, which makes no recommendation, adds that ‘offensive’ words are «likely to offend people». As for *taboo*, *OALD* and *LDOCE* warn that such expressions or words «should not be used». A slightly differently worded recommendation is given in *COBUILD*: words labelled *very offensive* «should be avoided».

The label *slang*, according to *OALD*’s and *CALD*’s definitions, does not carry a negative connotation. In Landau’s list (see 2. above) *slang* is both a kind of usage information and its label, in a sort of tautology, and it is not a register label. For Jackson (2013: 152) the «status of words» is measured «in terms of their disapproval by the speech community at large», and *slang* marks this kind of restriction together with *vulgar* and *taboo*. According to Atkins and Rundell (2008: 227) *register* as a «marking indicator» includes *slang* and *jargon* labels. However, *slang* is also associated with a negative connotation in the definitions of *bloody* and *shit* as examples of *taboo* words (see 2.3 below).

## 2.2 Entries

### *OALDO*

- *disapproving*: showing that you do not approve of somebody/ something.
- *offensive*: rude in a way that causes somebody to feel upset or annoyed because it shows a lack of respect.
- *slang*: very informal words and expressions that are more common in spoken language, especially used by a particular group of people, for example, children, criminals, soldiers, etc.
- *taboo*: considered so offensive or embarrassing that people must not mention it.

### *LDOCEO*

- *disapproving*: showing that you think someone or something is bad or wrong.



- *not polite*: not listed as an entry [but cf. *impolite*: not polite SYN rude].
- *taboo*: 1. a taboo subject, word, activity etc. is one that people avoid because it is extremely offensive or embarrassing. 2. not accepted as socially correct. 3. Too holy or evil to be touched or used.

### COBUILD

- *offensive*: something that is offensive upsets or embarrasses people because it is rude or insulting.
- *rude*: when people are rude, they act in an impolite way towards other people or say impolite things about them.
- *very offensive*: not included in the dictionary as an entry\* [*deeply offensive* is a collocation].
- *very rude*: not included in the dictionary as an entry\*.

\*As expected, these labels are not entries in COBUILD, since they are not lemmas: a lemma is «a word considered as its citation form» [COBUILD, s.v. *lemma*].

### CALDO

- *disapproving*: showing that you think someone or something is bad or wrong.
- *offensive*: likely to make people angry or upset.
- *slang*: informal language, often language that is only used by people who belong to a particular group.

The definitions above often share some common features. OALDO's, LDOCEO's and CALDO's very similar, or identical, wording of the definitions of *disapproving* highlight the user's negative attitude towards someone or something. According to OALDO's, COBUILD's and CALDO's definitions, 'people' or 'somebody', as the addressees of a disapproving comment, are 'upset' (another word negatively marked) by *offensive* language. OALDO's and LDOCEO's definitions of *taboo* use the same adjectives ('offensive' and 'embarrassing'), and the two dictionaries clearly state that people 'must avoid' or 'not mention' words so labelled. No reference is made to a negative attitude in OALDO's and CALDO's definitions of *slang*, as will be seen in 2.3; *slang* is also used with a negative connotation in OALDO's entry *taboo*, and in COBUILD's entry *fuck*, the word given as 'the' example of the label *very rude*.

Even though *slang* is included in neither *LDOCE*'s, nor *COBUILD*'s list of labels, its definitions as an entry word in *COBUILD* and in *LDOCE* are briefly analysed here because they express some negativity. In *COBUILD* the definition of the verb *to slang* (which is included only in this dictionary) is «to abuse (someone) with vituperative language: insult», and it clearly carries a negative connotation, while *slang* [noun] vocabulary «is not appropriate to the standard form of a language or to formal contexts». In *LDOCE*, the definition of the noun *slang* reads «very informal, sometimes offensive language that is used especially by people who belong to a particular group, such as young people or criminals»: the examples do not display a particularly negative attitude. Conversely, the examples included in the cross-referenced section *Thesaurus* of the entry *word*<sup>16</sup>, that is «grass is slang for marijuana», «prison slang» and «army slang», do carry a negative image.

### 2.3 Examples

*OALDO*'s and *COBUILD*'s definitions of the words used as examples of the labels listed in their print editions are presented below (cf. above 2.1): *LDOCE* and *CALD* do not give any words as examples of their labels.

#### *OALDO*

##### *disapproving*

*blinkered*: (disapproving) not aware of every aspect of a situation; not willing to accept different ideas about something, somebody's attitude, stance.

*newfangled*: (disapproving) used to describe something that has recently been invented or introduced, but that you do not like because it is not what you are used to, or is too complicated.

##### *offensive*

*half-caste*: (taboo, offensive) an offensive word used to describe a person whose parents are from different races.

*slut*: (disapproving, offensive) 1). an offensive word for a woman who is thought to have many sexual partners; 2). An offensive word for a woman who is thought to be very untidy or lazy.

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<sup>16</sup> <[https://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/word#word\\_\\_35](https://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/word#word__35)>

*taboo*

*bloody*: (offensive, slang) a swear word that many people find offensive that is used to emphasize a comment or an angry statement.

*shit*: [as an exclamation] a swear word that many people find offensive, used to show that you are angry or annoyed. (The exclamation, the noun and the verb are labelled *taboo, slang*; the adjective, «especially British English», is labelled *taboo, offensive, slang*.)

*slang*

*dingbat*: (North American English, slang) a stupid person

*dosh*: [uncountable] (British English, slang) money

**COBUILD**

*offensive*

*cripple*: a person with a physical disability or a serious permanent injury is sometimes referred to as a cripple. [offensive]

*rude*

*bloody*: is used by some people to emphasize what they are saying, especially when they are angry. [British, rude, emphasis]

*very offensive*

*wog*: is an extremely offensive word for anyone whose skin is not White. [British, very offensive]

*very rude*

*fuck*: Language note: *fuck* is a rude and offensive word. Exclamation: expresses very rude feelings. British English *taboo* and *slang*

*OALDO* and *COBUILD* share the label *offensive*: to define it, they use the same adjective, *rude* (which is also a label in *COBUILD*), and the same verb, *upset* (see 2.2 above). They also share the word *bloody* as an example, but of different labels, namely of *taboo* in *OALDO* and of *rude* in *COBUILD*. It is worth noting that, strangely, in *OALDO*, unlike all the other entries for the words which are given as examples of its labels (*disapproving, offensive, slang*), the entry word *bloody* is labelled «offensive and slang» and not *taboo*, so that, quite unexpectedly,

the word used as one of the examples of the label *taboo* is not labelled *taboo* as an entry word.

As defined in *OALD*'s list of labels (see 2.1) and in its entry in *OALDO* (see 2.2), *slang* is not associated with a negative connotation, while it is used together with *offensive* in the definition of *bloody* (a *taboo* word), and with *taboo* and *offensive* in the definition of *shit*. Both are swear words: as such they are associated with a negative attitude, and *shit*, in particular as an exclamation, has a definitely negative connotation.

*Slang* is used as a label together with *offensive* in *OALDO*'s definitions of *bloody*, and together with *offensive*, *rude*, and even with *taboo*, in the definitions of *shit*. *Taboo* and *slang*, though they are not included in the list of *COBUILD*'s labels, are also used in *COBUILD*'s entry *fuck* as an example of the label *very rude*. *COBUILD*'s *rude*, according to its definition, is used to «describe words and behaviour that are likely to embarrass or offend people, because they relate to sex or to body functions», and its example of *very rude*, i.e. *fuck*, is also labelled *taboo* and *slang* «in British English».

It is also worth noting that *dingbat*, i.e. ‘a stupid person’, one of *OALDO*'s words given as examples of *slang*, is used in American English: it might carry a negative connotation, while the other example, i.e. *dosh*, meaning ‘money’ as used in British English, does not seem to. *COBUILD* too defines *dingbat* «crazy or stupid» person, and labels it «informal, disapproval»<sup>17</sup>. As a side comment, *LDOCEO* includes *dingbat* in the entry for *ding-a-ling (sic)* [a very rare word<sup>18</sup>], with the same definition and the same note («American English spoken»), while *CALDO*, which defines *dingbat* in a similar way, «a stupid or easily confused person», also adds other senses, related to «a symbol, or a font, or a puzzle», and that it is also used in British English.

### 3. Concluding remarks

Other labels have been used in dictionaries and they have been differently defined in the literature about them. For example, according to Atkins and Rundell (2008: 113), labels showing a negative attitude

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<sup>17</sup> Probably ‘showing disapproval’.

<sup>18</sup> Frequency of occurrence is explicitly marked in *COBUILD* and *LDOCEO* (in different ways), and indirectly in *OALDO* and *CALDO*, which specify the CEFR levels.

include «*derogative* (intending to be disrespectful) and *pejorative* (intending to show contempt), in addition to *offensive*», which «may have intent on the part of the speaker or may be unconscious», a comment which emphasises that learners must be (made) aware of the subtleties of the language and of words that might have a negative connotation. *Cripple* is an example of an offensive word, as in *COBUILD*.

According to Stachurska «diastatic information, which refers to socio-cultural groups, is a feature which connects a word or any of its senses with a specific social community» (2018: 93). The most common labels of this kind are *slang*, *vulgar* or *taboo* and this shows once more that words labelled *slang* (may) have a negative connotation. 'Socio-cultural groups' may change in time and the connotation of a word may change as well. In general, the use of words is subject to change and usage labels have been applied accordingly. As Burchfield noted, in the past «words belonging to the 'controversial vocabulary'», i.e. words that are subject to restrictions on their contextually appropriate use, were often excluded from dictionaries or were accompanied by «restrictive or explanatory labels» (1975: 352). Most of them had changed their lexicographical status at the time he wrote his 1975 paper, and, as he added, «sexual and slang words referring to excretory functions have moved out of the area of controversy» (*ibid.*). In addition, some labels had occasionally been 'invented', as was the case with *coarse slang*, which was meant to «cover a few taboo words»: vice versa, the old-fashioned label *not in polite use* was dropped, though it was «once or twice used by younger members of the staff» (1975: 360) who did not like the word *vulgar*, which was used in the *Supplements* to the *OED*.

It must be said that any comparison of the use and role of labels can be made between or among dictionaries belonging to the same category and published at roughly the same time: not only is the use of words subject to change, but so are usage labels. For example, *nigger* was labelled *derogatory* in *OALD* (1995), and *taboo*, *slang* in *CIDE* (1995)<sup>19</sup> (Hünig, 2012: 7): *derogatory*, as a label, is no longer used in *OALDO*. *Nigger* is labelled *taboo*, *offensive*, *slang* in *OALDO*, and *very offensive* in *CALDO*. Interestingly, *CIDE*'s labels are no longer used in *CALDO*. In addition, «many labels are umbrella terms that conceal a good deal of variation» (Atkins & Rundell, 2008: 496). Gläser includes the «markers derogatory and taboo» in «expressive connotations», as opposed to «stylistic connotations» and «register markers» (1998: 129).

It is significant that Norri's 2000 article includes the word/label

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<sup>19</sup> *Cambridge International Dictionary of English*, later *CALD* since 2003.

*derogatory* in its title, «Labelling of Derogatory Words». The labels *derogatory* (*disparaging*) and *offensive* «are generally said to emphasize, respectively, intention in the transmitter and reaction in the receiver» (Norri, 2000: 80), a distinction already made in the analysis of the label *disapproving* in 2.2 above. Norri adds that labels such as *derogatory* and *offensive* indicate that a person who uses a lexical item so labelled «expresses a negative view of the referent»<sup>20</sup> (2000: 72). Interestingly, the label *disapproving* is never mentioned in Norri's analysis of the labels used in «seven British and three American wordbooks» (2000: 74).

Differences and similarities have emerged in the labels used in the dictionaries for native speakers described in 1., and those adopted in the dictionaries for foreign learners examined in 2. with reference to words carrying a negative connotation. Johnson's (and others') *barbarous*, *low*, *coarse* (and other labels) have no longer been used, especially since Murray's *OED*, but labels indicating a negative connotation and/or the user's (usually speaker's) negative attitude towards someone or something have been and are a major feature of *LDs*. Labels such as, for example, *disapproving*, *taboo* and, up to a point, *slang* are supposed to make learners aware of their offensive [another label itself] load. In this sense *LDs'* labels belong to descriptive lexicography, though in some cases their definitions include prescriptive statements such as the peremptory «should not be used», or the less imperative (thanks to the verb 'avoid') «should be avoided». In some cases, wordings such as «you should not», or «people must not mention it» reveal the lexicographers' proscriptive approach. As Burchfield said (1975: 358), the difference between prescriptive and descriptive (see section 1.) lies in «an attitude of mind». According to the *OEDO* the meaning of proscriptive is «prohibitive».

Usage labels are particularly relevant in *LDs* whose users are expected to need specific guidance, in particular for their productive activities, in choosing the words appropriate to their intended purpose and to each situational context. Usage labels are useful for them to identify inappropriate remarks and offensive language and to avoid using them. As Finegan remarked (2020: 50) «labelling words and meanings sits on the edge between description and prescription, describing the status of a word or meaning and thereby implicitly guiding use». To smooth the edge, and 'direct the traffic', words of caution are in order in *LDs'* definitions and examples of the usage labels which indicate a negative connotation.

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<sup>20</sup> These are exactly the same words used by Card *et al.* (1984: 64), see section 2.

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