How Afrikaans women became fierce-tempered

Gerhard B van Huyssteen

Centre for Text Technology (CTexT), North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

gerhard.vanhuyssteen@nwu.ac.za

The family of Afrikaans words that could refer to fierce-tempered women, is rather small: *feeks, helleveeg, xantippe, furie, heks, geit(jie)*, and perhaps also *snip, slang, kat*, and *juffer*. As a general point of departure, we can assume that all of these have somewhat, if not considerably, pejorative emotive connotations. However, as will be discussed in this paper, not all language users agree that all these words are negative polarity items (i.e. "constructions whose use or interpretation is sensitive to polarity" (Israel 2006)). For example, the renowned Afrikaans novelist Riana Scheepers created a folk etymology for the word *feeks* ('shrew') as a contraction of *fee* ('fairy' – ameliorative) and *heks* ('witch' – pejorative), in order to convey her view that "every woman has something of a fairy, and something of a witch in her", and that "women with exceptionally strong personalities are often reviled as shrews" (Scheepers 2021).

This folk etymology of Scheepers gave rise directly to this article: Is there perhaps any truth in this etymological explanation? If not, where does *feeks* come from? What other words are part of *feeks*'s word family? What is the etymology of a near-synonymous word like *helleveeg*? Are *feeks* and *helleveeg* slurs; if so, what are their taboo values? And are these words only applicable to women, or can they also have male or other referents?

The purpose of this research is to provide answers to these and other questions. This investigation is part of a large-scale project on swear words in Afrikaans and other languages in its eco-system. One important subproject is to develop an Afrikaans swearword constructicon (the *Afrikaanse Vloekepedia*), situated specifically within the framework of construction grammar and some of its related theories (i.e. constructionalisation; see Traugott & Trousdale 2013) and applications (i.e. constructicography; see Lyngfelt *at al*. 2018).

In this presentation we will specifically focus on the etymological developments of *feeks* and *helleveeg* by postulating a constructionalization network. The theory of constructionalization aims to account for and describe the creation of new constructions (i.e. new form-meaning pairings), as well as changes to existing constructions (i.e. constructional change; see also Hilpert 2013). Based on perception survey conducted using online questionnaires, we will also briefly present some results on the taboo values; self-reported frequencies and prominence; and the gender of the words' referents.

REFERENCES

Hilpert, Martin. 2013. *Constructional change in English: Developments in allomorphy, word formation, and syntax*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Israel, Michael. 2006. "The pragmatics of polarity." In *The Handbook of Pragmatics*, edited by Laurence R. Horn and Gregory Ward, 701-723. London: Blackwell.

Lyngfelt, Benjamin, Lars Borin, Kyoko Ohara, and Tiago Timponi Torrent. 2018. *Constructicography: Constructicon development across languages*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Scheepers, Riana. 2021. Riana Scheepers borg die word: feeks [Riana Scheepers sponsors the word: feeks]. Facebook post. https://www.facebook.com/diewoordeboek/posts/10159460135944085. [2021/06/30].

Traugott, Elizabeth Closs, and Graeme Trousdale. 2013. *Constructionalization and constructional changes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.