

On the Cultural and Cognitive Nature of the *Skinny/Fatty* Opposition

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Abstract: Insulting seems to be as old the history of the mankind. From the very beginning of our existence people have been interested in themselves and they have always been humiliating those weaker, poorer or less attractive ones. This article aims at presenting the scope of vocabulary used as the synonyms of *skinny* and *fatty*. First, we shall focus on the way fat and skinny people have been perceived throughout history. Interestingly enough, at various historical moments, and – in various parts of the world – the stereotypes about fat and skinny people have been changing and complementing. Then, we proceed to present the gender-specific division of all synonyms which have been taken into consideration. It is fitting to add that the number of means which are there at one's disposal to describe a fat person is nearly twice as numerous as the list of those words that serve to encode the idea of being skinny. And last but not least, by means of cognitive apparatus and methodology we shall present the similarities and differences between the synonyms of *skinny* and *fatty*.

Keywords: skinny, fatty, cognitive domain, conceptual category, insults, zoosemy

In this article¹ we target a very narrow fraction of the whole panorama of human qualities that may be subject to insulting. We shall focus on those lexical items which may be employed as the synonyms of *skinny* and *fatty* as the effects of human nutritional habits have always been subject to mockery, ridicule and insulting, although the very fact of being either fat or skinny is not to be treated as a universally conceived quality. To be more precise, our aim is to take into consideration the nouns that have in the history of English been used in the sense 'a skinny person' and 'a fat person'.² In order to account for the semantics of individual lexical items we shall employ the cognitively-couched method of analysis³ which will allow us to reveal a number of characteristic features of the nature of semantic evolution of the *skinny/fatty* synonyms by means of the apparatus that includes, among others, such notions as conceptual categories, conceptual domains or attributive values.

¹ This article based on my Ph.D. thesis is not the analysis of the individual words, it rather presents the outcome of the analysis of the historical synonyms of *skinny* and *fatty*.

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² Data compiled on the basis of *The Big Book of Being Rude, Oxford Dictionary of Slang* and *Dictionary of Contemporary Slang*.

³ See, among others, Grzegorz A. Kleparski (1997).

To start with, since being labelled as either *skinny* or *fatty* is not merely the fact of language but also – to a considerable extent – the fact that belongs to the broadly-understood culture of the given society, let us start by formulating certain culture-oriented observations on the human quality of being either on the skinny or fat side. It is worth pointing out that abusive vocabulary is part and parcel of the so-called antilanguage.¹ The term² was coined by Michael Halliday, who – in turn – described the language used by anti-society which is set up within another society, as a conscious alternative to it (e.g. immigrants, students, unprivileged ones, prisoners).

As hinted recently by Bieńczyk (2012, p. 48), it goes without saying that the arts, that is literature, painting and sculpture, tend to speak about fat people on rare occasions, and the examples of famous characters that play the leading roles in literature or painting are rather skimpy. One of the first things that come to our mind is that the 16th-century master Rabelais used to focus on obese people or the plump beauties that were frequently the object of painting artists' attention in the Renaissance period. All in all, it seems that fat people are perfect candidates for the supporting parts, to mention only Pan Zagłoba (a character from the Polish novel *With Fire and Sword*), the plump monks from U. Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, a few characters from H. Balzac's stories or Sancho Pansa. In spite of being physically characteristic and conspicuous, such characters tend to stay in the background of the protagonists who may be either tall or short, but – by and large – tend to keep on the slender side. More generally, it seems that being on the skinny side goes hand in hand with the power to influence the flow of history, bring about changes on a wide or global scale, while obese people are in a way witnesses of the changing flow of history, who may be compared to confessors – by and large – good-natured and sleepy ones who are not worth giving them their own stories; neither do they frequently show much will to change the reality they are happily grounded in (cf. Bieńczyk, 2012). One can hardly imagine that such well-known characters as Anna Karenina, Emma Bovary or Romeo could be obese and still live their lives the way they did. This is mainly due to the fact that obesity – because of an excess with which it bewilders – somewhat underlyingly collides with the existential experience that characters come by. The vast majority of authors either consciously or unconsciously believe that the history of a man – even an evil one – prototypically demands a slender person. One can hardly imagine a plump lover, more associated with fun than passion. Interestingly enough, as noted by Bieńczyk (2012, p. 48), people hardly ever realize that Hamlet himself was far from being a scarecrow, even though it was clearly said in the text that *He is fat and scant of breath*. Shakespeare paid special attention to the appearance of his characters, and protruding bellies never harmonized with tragic, metaphysical, or political issues he raised in his plays. On the other hand, in the history of mankind others approached the issue from a different perspective. For example, as early as in the middle of the 19th century,

¹ See Peter Chilton (2005, pp. 136-137).

² See Piotr P. Chruszczewski (2011, p. 181, pp.185-191).

Gautier (1848) pondered over the corpulence of a genius, claiming that the times of meagre writers and men who suffered from love have come to an end. It is stressed that the prose of C. Dickens, G. Flaubert, A. Dumas or V. Hugo is not deprived of fat meals devoured in haste. Thus, literature frequently dealt with poverty as it was part and parcel of life in the 19th century. Families tended to be much larger than these times and people had ten children or more. Nevertheless, it was an accepted part of life, that a number of children would die in their early years, from childhood diseases. Families were forced to share rooms in order to pay the rent and it was hard to put food on the table.

It goes without saying that it is easier to delve into the history of literature and art than the history of the human body. There have been various trends, movements and styles, and – therefore – one can easily notice changes in art. Yet, problems start when it comes to speaking about changes in human body and its perception. Even within our lifespan, human height seems to have been subject to most observable change; almost every consecutive generation grows taller than the generation of their grandfathers and grandmothers. All in all, growing repression against the human body seems to be a predominant feature in the modern times of obesity which has always been a sin against nature, society and man himself.

Yet, views and pictures related to obesity have always been far from uniform and unambiguous. Take, for example, Rabelais, in whose books obesity took a vital part in creating the ludic nature. With time, obesity started to be associated with power and wealth. We all know the image of the fat bourgeois, 19th- or 20th-century capitalist holding a cigar in his plump fingers. For many people of today, being on the fat side is inevitably associated with wealth and the state of well-being. In Polish culture, though the anti-obesity campaign is in full swing, and works good results, we often hear family small talk pronouncements, such as *Wójelek Józio dobrze wygląda* 'Uncle Joe looks good', which is almost unambiguously interpreted that uncle Joe is doing well, is very successful, and therefore looks plump to say the least. Obviously, in the light of the general anti-obesity campaign, the kind of equality mark drawn between 'goodness' and 'fatness' is very much paradoxical. By contrast, growing thin and taking vests and trousers in was part and parcel of life of the poor and the socially unprivileged. Nowadays, the situation is opposite, because a high social status goes hand in hand with being if not on the skinny side, than at least with those who are definitely on the slim side, whereas poverty is associated with scruffy people consuming loads of potatoes and junk food rolls.

The evaluation of the aesthetic value of human body is nothing new because the beginnings of aesthetic judgement of bodies – both female and male – started already in ancient Greece, but was certainly in its heyday in the Renaissance period. Note that the women of Ancient Greece paid attention to their physical appearance; sculptures and art present slender females with dark, curly hair and classical features. According to Bieńczyk (2012, pp. 48-49), already in the 17th century obesity started to be a much

despised symbol of sloppiness. Fortunately, erotic fertile imagination of people has always been trying to regain what was lost and socially despised, hence numerous examples of Baudelaire's and Schulz's giantesses, fat ladies from Maupassant's works or Fellini's king size sex matrons. All in all, one may distinguish between various modes of perceiving fat people, to mention only Botero's paintings, the Orient art, Iberoamerican art or Far Eastern perception of obesity.

From the contrastive point of view, one sees that there is a sharp quantitative difference between the body of historical formations synonymous with *skinny*, and – on the other hand – those nominal lexical items that have been documented in the sense 'fatty'. To be precise, one may say that the historical body of synonyms of fatty is more than two times larger than that of skinny. The volume of the thematic, gender-specific lists compiled below on the basis of consulted lexicographic sources (see *The Big Book Of Being Rude*, *Oxford Dictionary of Slang* and *Dictionary of Contemporary Slang*) show that the number of expressions that have been applied to those who are on the slender or skinny side is far less overwhelming than the historical list of those language tools that have been employed to refer to fat and obese people. In extralinguistic terms, this may point to the fact that the very quality of being skinny is not a primary source of social and cultural scorn or humour. We have compiled the following list of *skinny/fatty* synonyms:

1. Female, Male and Epicene Synonyms of *Skinny*

A. Female-specific synonyms of *skinny* the body of which includes the following set of lexical items: *Skinny Lizzie, long slab, Sally B., straight up six o'clock girl.*

B. Male-specific synonyms of *skinny*, and this corpus includes the following lot of lexical items: *Miss Xylophone, scaly bloke, gawkey, spider-catcher, wangle.*

C. Epicene synonyms of *skinny*, the body of which includes the following long list of lexical items: *anatomy, atomy, back-and-belly, bag of bones, bald-rib, barebones, bare-brisket, beanpole, bone, bone-in-a-valley, boneyard, cornstalk, death's head upon a mopstick, fence rail, hairpin, hat rack, hop-pole, kangaroo, lamp-post, lanky, legs, lonely in the weather, long drink of water, long thin streak of piss, margar, matchstick, monkey on a stick, natomy/nattermy, one of Pharaoh's lean kine, pair of tongs, pinner, raany/ranny, rainbow, rake, rasher of wind, rattlebones, rushlight, Sahara, scarce-o-fat, scarecrow, shadow, shotten herring, skin-a-guts, skin-and-grief, skinned rabbit, snaky-bony, streak, streak bean, topper, twig, weed, whang, yard of pump water.*

2. Female, Male and Epicene Synonyms of *Fatty*

A. Female-specific synonyms of *fatty*, the list of which includes the following lexical items: *bargain bucket, black-silk barge, b.o.b., broad-gauge lady, buffalo, buffarilla, bundle, cement-mixer, chubette, fatyma/fattyma, feather-bed and pillows,*

flahoola, fuss, fussock/fuzzock/fussocks, fustilarian, German aunt, heavyweight, heifer, hellpig, Judy with the big booty, Mother Bunch, murch, Nelly/Nellie, pig, pigger/pigmouth, poultice, queenie, scrut, shuttlebutt, sow, tent, whitechapel breed.

B. Male-specific synonyms of *fatty*, the body of which include such lexical items as: *baron George, bartholomew (boar) pig, beer bottle, bladder of lard, blood and guts alderman, buss-belt, cooper-belly, cut puss, fat cock, fat Jack of the bone-house, fatymus/fattymus, flanderkin, forty-guts, gutsy, Jack Weight, Mr Double Tripes, puff guts, Queen Mary.*

C. Epicene synonyms of *fatty*, the list of which includes such lexical items as: *ass-belly, bag of guts, Bahama Mama, barrel, barrel-ass, bauson, bay window, beer barrel, beer gut, beer muscle, beer pot, (Big) Bertha, blimp, blimp boat, blivet/blivit, bloater, blubber, blubberass, blubber-belly, blubber-butt, blubber-gut/blubber-guts, booze balloon, booze belly, bowl of jelly, brawny-buttock, bubblebutt, bucket of lard/bucket of blubber, buddha belly, buddley, builder's bum, bull chin, bundle, buxton bloaters, chabby/chabs, cow, Crisco, chyb, chub(b)(s), double guts, doughbelly, dumpling, Dutch build, fat-arse/fat-ass, fat cock, fatso, fattoon, fatty, fatty bum-bum, feather-bed, flab, flop, floppy, fuss, fussock, fustilarian, German goiter, greasy guts, greedy-guts, gundiguts, gutbucket, guts, guts and garbage, gutso, guttie/gutty, heavyweight, heifer, horse heavy, Humpty-Dumpty, jelly belly, keetlebelly, lard(-ass)/lard-arse, lard-bucket, lardo, limehouse cut, load, lump, melting moments, Michelin (tyre), Miss Piggy, oinker, pig, plumber's bum, porker, princod, pudding-belly, ribs, roly-poly, slob, slug, slump, sow, squab, tonk, tripe and trillbub, tub, tub of guts, tub of lard, whale, wide load, whale, whopper, working-man's smile.*

First and foremost, let us start with the analysis of the historical synonyms of *skinny*. The cognitively-couched apparatus has enabled us to reveal many characteristic features of the nature of semantic evolution of the synonymic resources subject to our scrutiny. Among others, we have evidenced only a few cases of semantic shift from the conceptual source macrocategory **ANIMALS**¹ to the target macrocategory **HUMAN BEING**, and here the mechanism of nominal zoosemy² has affected semantic evolution of e.g. *kangaroo, monkey on a stick, skinned rabbit* or *shotten herring*. Secondly, one may find evidence for the existence of several cases of semantic transfer referred to as plantosemy (e.g. *twig, weed, beanpole* or *cornstalk*). Likewise, there are certain cases of metonymic pars-pro-toto development, in which a lexical item originally related to the conceptual category **BODY PARTS** (*bone(s), barebones*) comes to associate with the sense 'skinny person' at some point of its evolution. Last

¹ To mark conceptual categories I have adopted the practice of using underlined capital letters written in bold (e.g. **ANIMALS**). In turn, all attributive values are inserted into the brackets (e.g. <UNKEMPT>). Individual domains are marked by means of capital letters written in bold (e.g. the **DOMAIN OF PHYSICAL APPEARANCE** [...]), whereas the *skinny/fatty* synonyms are written in italics (e.g. *scarecrow*).

² See Robert Kieltyka (2013).

but not least, there is a category of semantic transfers that includes cases of semantic shifts from various subcategories of the conceptual macrocategory **INANIMATE OBJECTS** (e.g. **ORNAMENTS, IMPLEMENTS, MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS**) to the targeted macrocategory **HUMAN BEING** (e.g. *hairpin, rake* and *rattlebones*).

The construal of the relevant senses of lexical items may be formalized by the measure of involvement of various Conceptual Domains (henceforth **CDs**) in the rise of historical senses of the analysed human-specific nouns. In fact, it turns out that one can speak about certain regular involvement of certain **CDs** because such conceptual domains as the **DOMAIN OF SEX [...]**, the attributive path of which presupposes the three attributive values <EPICENE>, <MALE>, <FEMALE> are necessarily put to work because all the historical synonyms of *skinny* (either those used with reference to male (e.g. *spider-catcher, gawkey*), female (e.g. *skinny Lizzie, straight-up six o'clock girl*) or both sexes) require involvement of the **CD** in question indiscriminately. In practice, it turns out that – by and large – all the lexical items are basically marked as epicene (e.g. *hairpin, rake, weed, lanky, twig, shotten herring* or *kangaroo*). Given the cognitively-couched apparatus, the semantic history of the lexical items involves the activation of the attributive values <SLIM>, <LEAN>, <SLENDER> that are specified for the attributive path of the **DOMAIN OF PHYSICAL APPEARANCE [...]**. At the same time, in individual cases, such negatively marked attributive values linked to the same **CD** as <UNKEMPT>, <UNATTRACTIVE>, <RAGGED> are also activated (*scarecrow*). Other **CDs** the attributive values of which are highlighted for the semantics of the historical synonyms in question are the **DOMAIN OF HEIGHT [...]** and the **DOMAIN OF HEALTH [...]**. To be more precise, the rise of the sense 'skinny' is often coupled with the prominence of the attributive value <TALL>, highlighted within the attributive path of the **DOMAIN OF HEIGHT [...]** (e.g. *cornstalk, lanky, streak* and *beanpole*), and such negatively coloured attributive values as <FEEBLE>, <WEAK> that may be specified for the attributive path of the **DOMAIN OF HEALTH [...]** (e.g. *shotten herring* and *weed*). It is only on rare occasions that the historical synonyms of *skinny* come to be marked for the attributive values – most frequently of negative colouring – presupposed for the attributive path of the **DOMAIN OF CHARACTER AND BEHAVIOUR [...]**, such as <WORTHLESS>, <LAZY> (e.g. *shotten herring*). Obviously, the cases of zoosemy and plantosemy (e.g. *kangaroo, shotten herring, cornstalk, weed* and *twig*) involve the activation of the attributive values <ANIMAL> and <PLANT> that are specified for the attributive path of the **DOMAIN OF BEING [...]**. It may be concluded that – apart from a few cases of metonymically conditioned transfers – in the majority of the cases, we are dealing with metaphorical extensions based on similarity, and the likeness involved is most frequently of an easily definable form and nature. Normally, the nature of the similarity that conditions the transfer stems from the presence of certain attributive values specifiable for the attributive path of the **DOMAIN OF PHYSICAL APPEARANCE [...]**, the **DOMAIN OF HEIGHT [...]**, such as <SLIM>, <LEAN>, <SLENDER>, <TALL>. To put it in purely extralinguistic terms,

someone who is perceived as being skinny may be perceived either as being as tall as cornstalk, as tall as beanpole, as tall as weed sticking out on the meadow or as tall as a scarecrow above the surface of the greenfield. In turn, being slim may be conceptually equalled and translated either with the characteristics of a twig or a hairpin. In each of the cases singled out here, it is variously perceived parameter of length, coupled with the lack of conspicuous width that provides a building bridge between the historically original sense of the word and the metaphorical extension that appears at some further stage of the evolution of the word's meaning.

Let us now formulate certain conclusions related to the application of the cognitive framework in the analysis of the historical synonyms of *fatty*. To begin with, we have evidenced a dozen or so cases of transfer from the conceptual macrocategory **ANIMALS** to the target macrocategory **HUMAN BEING**. The mechanism of nominal zoosemy has influenced the evolution of such lexical items as *bauson*, *bloater*, *buffalo*, *chub(s)*, *cow*, *heifer*, *pig*, *sow*, *squab* or *whale*. To a much greater extent than in the case of the historical synonyms of *skinny*, the attributive path of the **DOMAIN OF BEING [...]** proved to be highly involved in the process of formation of the synonyms of *fatty*. Undoubtedly – and not at all surprisingly – various extralinguistic factors are responsible for this transfer. By and large, in all instances, we can say that the transfer to the conceptual category **HUMAN BEING** may have been conditioned by highlighting such shape-related conceptual elements as <FAT> or <ROUNDISH> that are relevant for the construal of both human-specific and animal-specific relevant senses, and, hence, those elements that provide the conceptual bridge for the shift that stems from the nature of the attributive path of the **DOMAIN OF PHYSICAL APPEARANCE [...]**. In other words, it may be concluded that the elements within the attributive path of this **CD** must have played an active – if not decisive – role in the rise of the metaphorical sense ‘a fat person’.

We have witnessed a handful of cases of semantic transfer referred to in the literature of the subject as foodsemy (e.g. *dumpling*, *pudding belly*, *jelly belly*, *doughbelly*). Here, one has grounds to conjecture that profiling of such a specific attributive value as <SPONGY> may have formed the conceptual bridge between the two historical senses of the nouns discussed. In other words, on the basis of this conceptual association – at a certain point of the historical development – the above mentioned words started to be employed in the human-specific sense ‘a fat person’. Similarly, there are only a few cases of metonymic pars-pro-toto development in which a lexical item primarily associated with the conceptual category **BODY PARTS** develops the sense ‘fatty’ (*gut(s)*, *greedy-gut(s)*) and a handful of compounds which – at the same time – may be classified as belonging to the foodsemy, e.g. *jelly belly*, *doughbelly*). Moreover, one may speak of a group of semantic shifts that includes cases of semantic transference from a variety of subcategories that may be distinguished within the conceptual macrocategory **INANIMATE OBJECTS** (e.g. **CONTAINERS**, **WEAPON**) to the targeted macrocategory **HUMAN BEING**. One may conclude that it is the variously

perceived parameter of shape that provides the building bridge between the original sense of the word and the metaphorical extension that surfaces at a certain point of time. Interestingly, we may speak of other conceptual categories, such as **SOUNDS**, which has been the source of such lexical items as *flop* or *oinker*, or **SUBSTANCES**, which involves such historical synonyms as *fatso* or *fatty*. Although one can hardly speak of any bridge between such conceptual categories as **SOUNDS** and **FATTY**, the search for the similarities between the conceptual category **FATTY** and **SUBSTANCE** is fairly obvious, especially when we take into account the fact that fat itself is a substance. As for the synonyms of *fatty*, all the cases of transfer may be associated with the activation of such conceptual values as <OVERWEIGHT>, <FAT> and <OBESE> presupposed for the attributive path of the **DOMAIN OF PHYSICAL APPEARANCE** [...]. Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that – at the same time – the construal of the semantics of the vast majority of the lexical items is also linked to the attributive paths of other **CDs**. Curiously enough, there is a reverse tendency when we take into account the fact that in the case of the historical synonyms of *skinny*, the number of other **CDs** involved was rather low. For the attributive path of the **DOMAIN OF PHYSICAL APPEARANCE** [...], we observe the activation of various negatively loaded conceptual elements which are – extralinguistically speaking – often associated with being on the fat side, that is <FILTHY>, <UNTIDY>, <MESSY> and <SLOVENLY > (e.g. *sow* or *Whitechapel Breed*). Yet, it is the attributive path of the **DOMAIN OF CHARACTER AND BEHAVIOUR** [...] that deserves our special attention here. This is due to the fact that a number of historical synonyms of *fatty* are associated with a panorama of negatively loaded conceptual values that may justifiably be attributed to the scope of the attributive path of the **DOMAIN OF CHARACTER AND BEHAVIOUR** [...]:

bauson <INTRANSIGENT>, <UGLY>, <EMPTY-HEADED>, <NOISY>
cow <BASHFUL>, <COWARDLY>
heifer <CLUMSY>, <UNSOPHISTICATED>
pig <SURLY>, <SELFISH>, <ILL-MANNERED>, <GREEDY>, <LAZY>, <LOUSY>, <WILFUL>, <IMPOLITE>, <DRUNK>
squab <UNCOUTH>, <INEXPERIENCED>
blimp <POMPOUS>, <BOLD>
Whitechapel Breed <IMPUDENT>
roly-poly <WORTHLESS>, <VILE>
lardo <LAZY>
lump <BORING>, <UNINTERESTING>
slob <IMPOLITE>, <LAZY>
slug <LAZY>, <SLOW>

Most frequently – and not extralinguistically unjustifiably – being on the fat side is associated with laziness, slowness and impoliteness. Among the conceptual elements activated for the attributive path of the **DOMAIN OF CHARACTER AND**

BEHAVIOUR [...], one can hardly find even a single neutral value, not to mention a positively loaded one. Other **CDs** the attributive values of which are highlighted for the semantics of analysed data are the **DOMAIN OF AGE** [...] and the **DOMAIN OF HEIGHT** [...]. To be more precise, the sense ‘fatty’ is often coupled with the prominence of the attributive value <YOUNG> highlighted within the attributive path of the **DOMAIN OF AGE** [...] (e.g. *heifer, squab, dumpling, lump*), but – at the same time – one may speak about occasional prominence of the attributive value <SHORT> highlighted within the attributive path of the **DOMAIN OF HEIGHT** [...] (e.g. *dumpling, tub, Humpty- Dumpty*). Moreover, in a few cases we can see the working of yet another **CD** directly connected with the semantics of the lexical items linked to the conceptual category **FALLEN HUMAN BEING**, that is the **DOMAIN OF MORALITY** [...], for the attributive path of which the conceptual values <COMMERCIALY UNCHASTE>, <IMMORAL>, <PROMISCUOUS> are highlighted (e.g. *cow* and *pig*).¹

To sum up, insulting is and will be present in people’s lives. This paper was supposed to prove that the synonyms of *skinny* are either positively or neutrally loaded. There are only a few cases in which one may find features which have negative connotations. On the contrary, the analysis of the synonyms of *fatty* has shown that the vast majority – if not all – words are negatively loaded and people who are on the fat side are frequently perceived as being stupid, ugly or lazy. Quite surprisingly, the analysis has failed to show that fat people are regarded as witty and with positive attitude towards the world.

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¹ See Bożena Duda (2012).

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