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Tweeting with Bae: a Corpus Analysis of the Recent Lexical Item Bae

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Spring 2017
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Tweeting with *Bae*: a Corpus Analysis of the Recent Lexical Item Bae.

Abstract: In 2015, The American Dialect Society (ADS) gathered together in Portland Oregon for their 25th annual Word of the Year proceedings. During this January meeting, one word in particular, *Bae*, caused quite a stir. Defined by the ADS as meaning “a sweetheart or romantic partner” or as “worthy of affection or admiration” *bae* was the fourth-runner up for the “Word of the Year” category (Zimmer 1). Although the word’s origins are still somewhat a mystery, as some say it is a clipping of the word baby or babe (Zimmer, Solomon & Carson 2015), while others say that it is an acronym for *before anyone else* (Solomon 2015), one thing is for certain: the word has claimed its space within the ever-evolving English language .

However, outside of the ADS’ efforts no truly concerted works of linguistic analysis have been applied to the new lexical item. Other works such as Jesse Sheidlower’s 1995 book *The F-Word* (Sheidlower 1995), which focused entirely on the origin, evolution, and innumerable uses of the word *fuck* or more recently Alexandra D’arcy’s research on the word *like* (D’arcy 2007) and its evolving forms are proving that research focused on specific words and their meanings/usage is relevant and necessary and this project attempts to follow suit. This research fills the gap the word *bae* has created and provides insight on a word that has gained traction, heavy usage, and social significance.

This study leverages a combination of traditional lexicographical corpus and KWIC (keyword in context) concordance analysis (Durkin 2016) as well as sociolinguistic methods of field research that utilize syntactic acceptability and grammaticality judgements. The combination of these techniques was used in response to the suggestions of a recent cohort of linguists and lexicographers (Coleman et al 2014) who convened at the University of Leicester to discuss current research and best practices. They found that in terms of methodology, slang research must be rooted in evidence and citations of use, however, those citations must also be contextually appropriate. Corpus analysis alone is not always enough, a sociolinguistic approach is also necessary to fully understand the social function of new words.

To guide the research three research questions were used:

1. What are the different semantic meanings/senses for the word *bae*?
2. How is the word most frequently being used in sentences, and as what parts of speech?
3. What usages, if any, do its users deem ungrammatical?

To conduct this research project a corpus was created using 100 tweets containing the word *bae* in the content (not in a

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hashtag) and a KWIC concordance analysis was conducted to determine patterns of usage. Similar research projects such as Hasty's work on the acceptability and use of double modals (Hasty 2011) used far smaller sample sizes(12), but in an effort to collect a statistically large sample,100 tweets were initially analyzed and 50 of those tweets were presented to participants as a part of a survey. 50 were selected for the survey sample because it kept the time needed to complete the survey to under 30 minutes. Among those 50 tweets, each type of usage of *bae* found within the initial 100 tweets was also present at least once. Think-aloud elicitation protocols were then used with the survey to discuss grammaticality judgements with the participants. Two groups of participants were used. The first group was two females, and the second group was two males. All four members of the groups were from the same extended family (two sets of siblings/cousins). The participant group was selected in an effort to homogenize the sample and limit any "interfering factors" that may have led to variation, per the suggestion of Cornips & Poletto in their work: *On Standardising Syntactic Elicitation Techniques* (2005). At the conclusion of the research project it was evident that the semantic meanings of the word *bae* included those ones defined by the ADS (significant other/worthy of admiration) but also included another definition for the word: "the act of engaging in a relationship with another person" or "the act of being consumed with admiration" that allowed the word to function as a verb (Zimmer 1). Additionally *bae* was used in sample tweets as an adjective, this use was then verified by participants through affirmative grammaticality judgements. There were also a couple of examples within the corpus that were deemed ungrammatical by research participants and those instances mainly occurred when *bae* was used in conjunction with the determiners "a" and "the" in various forms. For example ".You guys are the *bae*" was not labeled a grammatical usage.

This research is relevant and important because the nuanced patterns discovered in *baes* usages, particularly in terms of construction with determiners and "be" verbs, shows that a complex grammar does exist in relation to the word and it is deserving of intentional research endeavors. This paper also works to support lexicographers and slang analysts like Wentland &Reissing (2014) in their efforts to prove the merit of investigating new lexical items. Slang words, although they may be informal are worthy of formal linguistic research, and a project such as this one only works to strengthen that argument. Lastly this research project may have implications for sociolinguistics. Many words like *bae* which have their origins in varieties of English like Black English are normally assigned less prestige within society (Mihalicek & Wilson 2001. It is the hope that in the future this study will be expanded to include larger and more diverse participant pools to additionally assess how factors such as race, gender, and class directly affect the patterns of usage and how the lexical items rooted in Black English may hold far more social prestige and power than previously recognized.