

FRAMES FOR THE SEMANTICS OF *BACHELOR*

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In historical lexicology, the sense development of many words is intriguing in that the same word may have widely different meanings in different contexts. Describing a variety spanning from a person's marital status to an academic position, *bachelor* belongs to this category. In this article I shall examine the reasons for this multiplicity of senses from an historical perspective.

The examination is based on Rosch's prototype theory (1975), Janicki's axiological sense analysis (1990), and my own version of frame semantics developed from Fillmore (1985) and Barsalou (1992). They are used for uncovering causes for the emergence of various senses of *bachelor*.

These theories all recognise that the 'connotations' widely decried as useless and idiosyncratic associations by traditional semanticists may be some of the most important causes of meaning changes in words.¹ One need only look at the sense development of many everyday words to realise that often a so-called 'connotation' has served as the basis of another major sense.² This would not be the case if the original connotation had only been marginal. One of the best examples is probably the sense development of *bachelor*.

According to the *OED*, the origin of *bachelor* is uncertain,³ but this is of no concern in this context which focuses on the sense development of the word. The different stages in the sense development will here be regarded as socially and pragmatically conditioned changes of prototypes. In the illustrations of the semantic frames discussed below, ovals represent concepts and their attributes, circles prototypical values of the attributes, and rectangles non-prototypical values. Exclusive prototypes (i.e. those without alternative values) are represented by broken circles. All definitions

and quotations are from the *OED*. This method of analysis has proved useful for examining and describing meaning changes over time and for conducting comparative studies of sense profiles of equivalent terms in different languages (see Persson 1998; 2002). It has the advantage that it attempts to supply explanations of the sense developments.

The first sense of *bachelor* in the *OED* shows that it originally denoted junior military leaders:

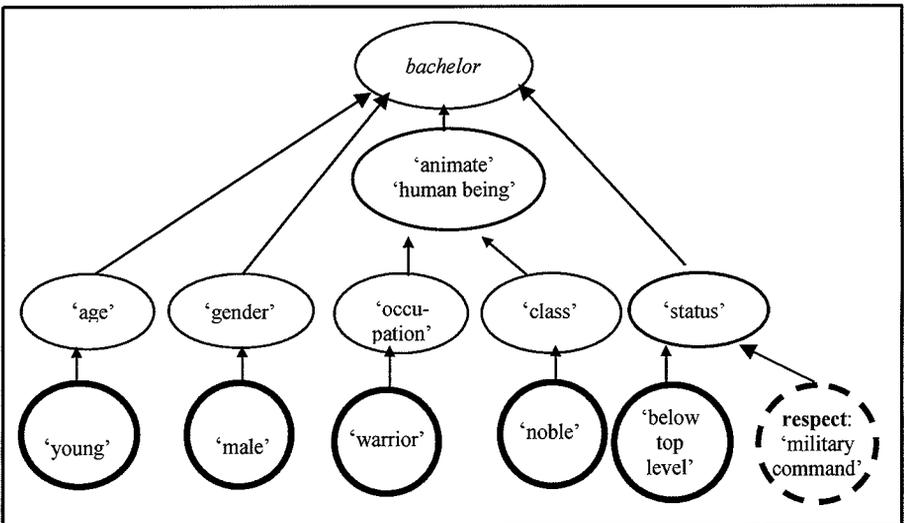
1. a. A young knight, not old enough, or having too few vassals, to display his own banner, and who therefore followed the banner of another; a novice in arms. [On this sense was founded the conjectural etymology of *bas chevalier*.]

-1297 R. Glouc. 453 Syre æong bacheler..ow art strong & corageus.

-1300 *Cursor M.* 8541 He was a borli bachelere, In al ,at werld had he na pere

This sense can be illustrated as follows:

Stage 1a. Junior knight



OED examples:

–1300 *Cursor M.* 8541 He was a borli bachelere, In al ,at werld had he na pere.

–1386 *Chaucer Sqrs. T.* 16 Yong, fressh, strong, and in Armes desirous, As any Bachelor [*v.r.* bachiler(e, -elere, -illier) of al his hous.

1415 *Pol. Poems* (1859) II. 125 Passe we all now in fere, duke, erle, and bachelere.

–1500 *Partenay* 1925 This knight is A worthi baculere.

1523 *Ld. Berners Froiss.* i. cclxiv. 390 Let sir Johan Chandos do his by himselfe, sythe he is but a bachelor.

818 *Hallam Mid. Ages* (1872) I. 195 Vavassors who obtained knight-hood were

commonly styled bachelors.

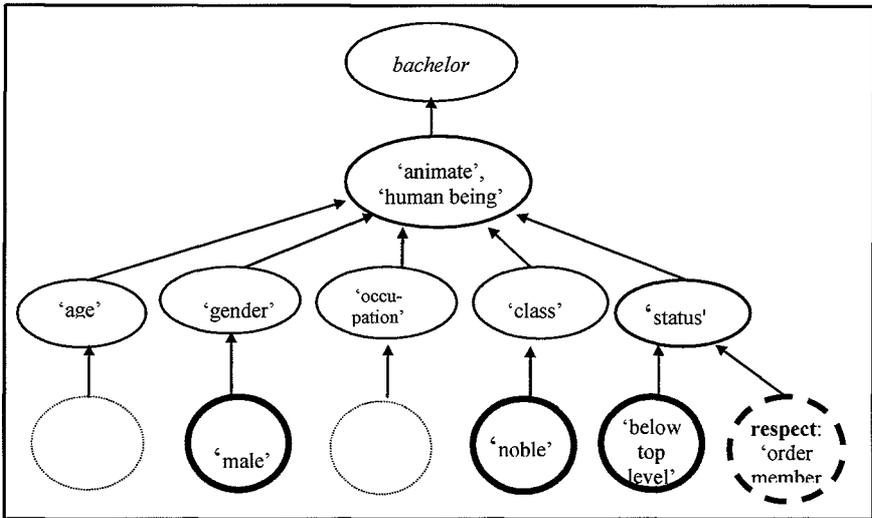
Bachelor, in this sense, thus signified a person who had not yet reached the top rank in his military career. It is this attribute of ‘status’ that was the origin of most other senses the word has developed.

The following sense (1b) is fairly close to it:

1b. Hence, *Knight Bachelor*, a knight of the lowest but most ancient order; the full title of a gentleman who has been knighted (without belonging to any one of the specially named ‘orders’)

1609 tr. *Sir T. Smith’s Commw. Eng.* 25 He [a banneret] being before a batcheler knight, is now of a higher degree.

Stage 1b. Junior member of an order



In this frame there are no values for 'age' and 'occupation' since they are irrelevant to this semantic profile. Again the value 'below top rank' for 'status' is dominant, although it is not applied in the same way to the status position as in the previous frame.

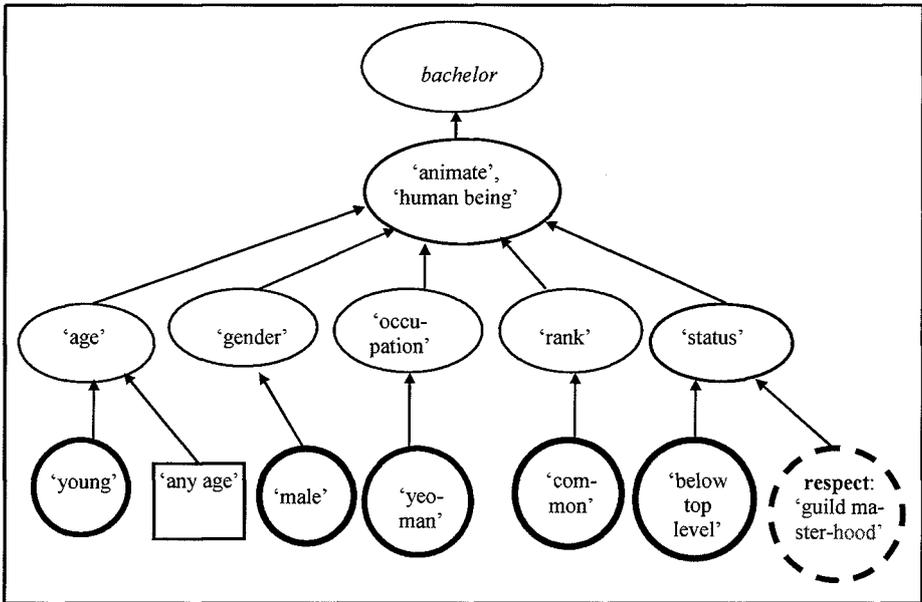
It is from the two military applications that the term branched out to other senses, in which *bachelor* means 'a person in a fairly low position in a guild'. This is illustrated in the next stage (2a):

2a. A junior or inferior member, or 'yeoman', of a trade-guild, or City Company. *Obs.*

(In London, their position and functions seem to have varied at different times, and in different Companies; in later times Bachelors were appointed only for ceremonial occasions, chiefly when one of the Company was chosen Lord Mayor, their duty being 'to serve in foynes and budge'⁴ on Lord Mayor's Day. So in Bye Laws of Grocers' Company of 1711.)

[1390 *Archives of Grocers' Comp.* 76 *Esliieuxz Mesteres dez Grocers Roberd Peper et Herri Hatton Bacheleres.* - 1427 in Heath *Grocers' Comp.* (1869) 5 *Diuerse persones ikallyd Bacheleris.*

Stage 2a. Junior member of a guild



OED examples:

[1390 *Archives of Grocers' Comp.* 76 *Eslieuxz Mesteres dez Grocers Roberd Peper et Herri Hatton Bacheleres.*]

1427 in Heath *Grocers' Comp.* (1869) 5 *Diuerse persones ikallyd Bacheleris.*

1533 Wriothesley *Chron.* (1875) I. 18 *A barge also of Batchlers of the Majors craft.*

1691 Blount *Law Dict.* s.v., *Every Company of the Twelve, consists of a Master, two Wardens, the Livery, (which are Assistants in Matters of Council, or at the least, such as the Assistants are chosen out of) and the Bachelors, who are yet but in expectance of Dignity among them, and have their Function only in attendance upon the Master and Wardens.*

1809 TOMLINS *Law Dict.* s.v., *The bachelors, in other companies called the yeomanry.*

It is fair to assume that here, too, this sense development is triggered by the position 'below top level (rank)'.

At the next stage, the term appeared at universities as a designation of academic status:

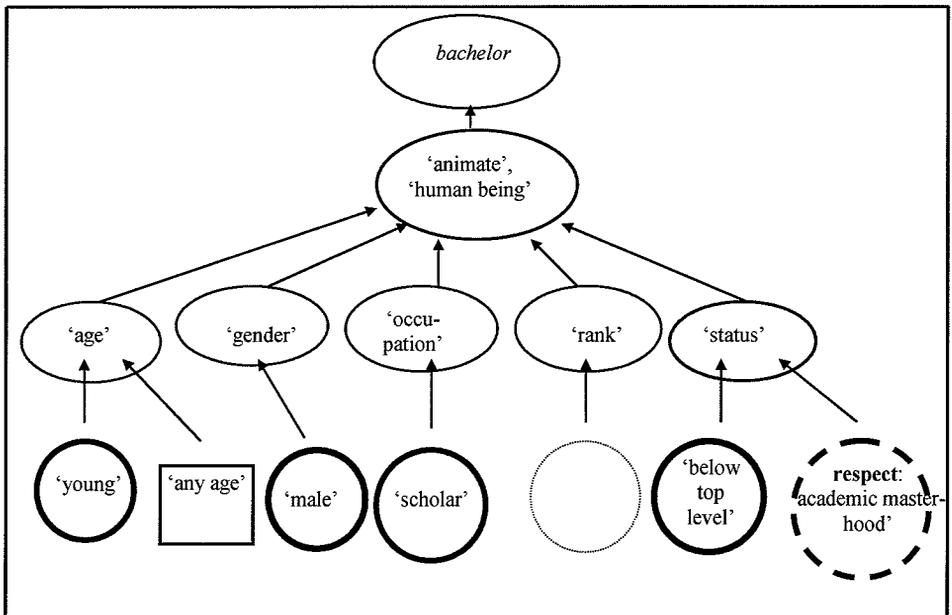
3a. One who has taken the first or lowest degree at a university, who is not yet a *master* of the Arts. (In this use, a woman may now be Bachelor of Arts, etc.) [In this sense, latinized as *baccalarius*, subsequently altered by a pun or word-play to *baccalaureus* as if connected with *bacca lauri* laurel berry, which has sometimes been gravely given as the 'etymology.']

- 1362 LANGL, *P. Pl. A. Prol. 90*, I sauh ,er Bisschops Bolde and Bachilers of diuyn.

- 1386 CHAUCER *Frankl. T. 398* His felawe..was that tyme a Bachelor of lawe.

- 1577 HARRISON *England i. ii. iii. 79* They ascend higher unto the estate of batchelers of art after foure yeares.

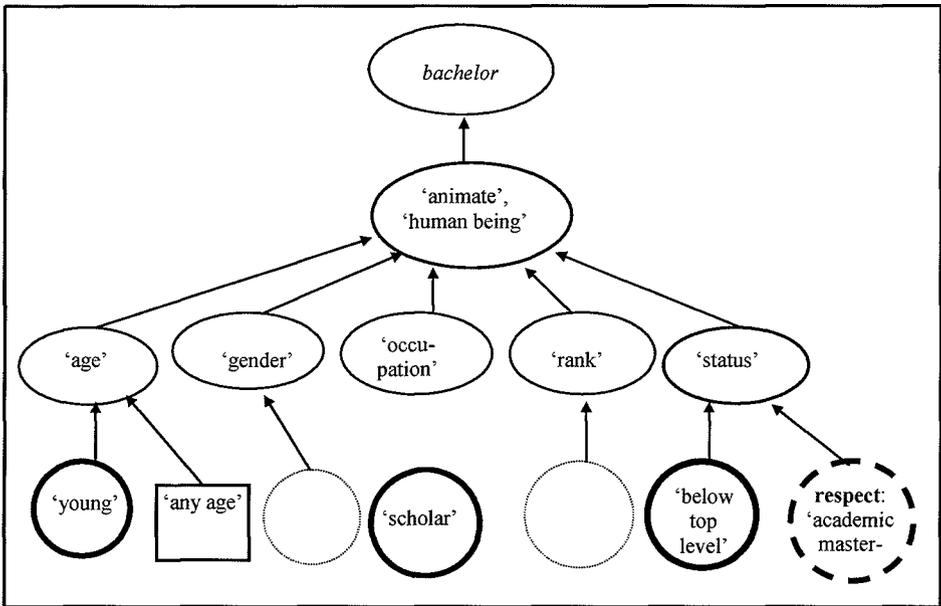
Stage 3a. Male academic *bachelor*



In this sense of bachelor, ‘rank’ is unimportant and consequently empty. The value of ‘below top level’ connected with ‘status’ triggers this development of the sense of the word: An academic bachelor still has to attain the degree of master.

The present-day gender-neutral sense of academic *bachelor* is illustrated in the following frame (3b):

Stage 3b. Epicene (gender-neutral) academic *bachelor*



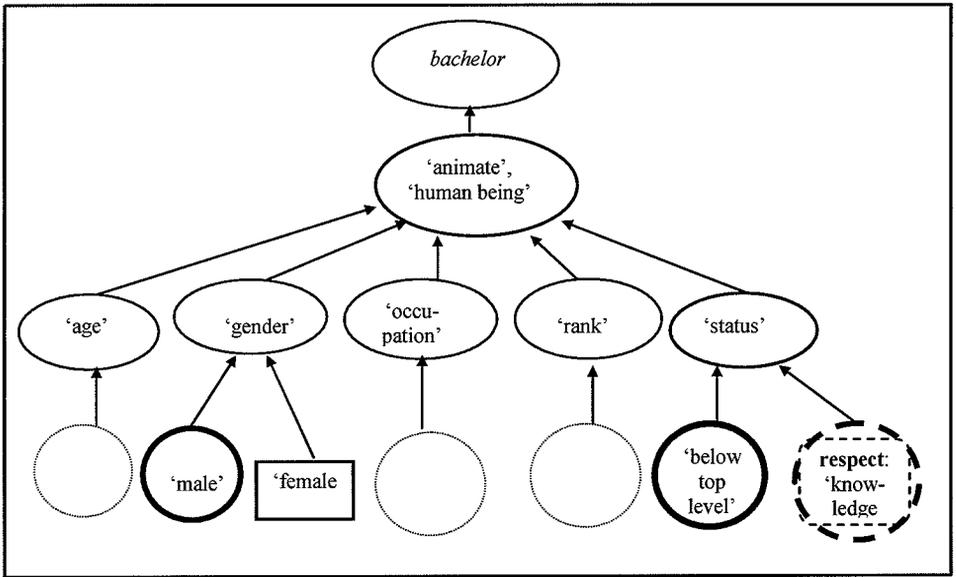
The obsolete sense of *bachelor* as an inexperienced person may have derived from the above academic sense:

3c

b. *transf.* An inexperienced person, a novice. *Obs.*

1604 T. WRIGHT *Passions Mind* iv. i. 114 Some men will dispute..about matters exceeding their capacitie..I haue heard these batchellors hold talke..wilfully and obstinatly in matters of Philosophie and Diuinitie.

Stage 3c. An ignorant person



The word then moves into the domain of marital status where it designates 'an unmarried man of marriageable age.' It has an overtone of 'below the top level', since it reflects that not too many decades ago, both men and women were expected to marry and those who did not were 'failures', termed *spinsters* and *bachelors* respectively.⁵

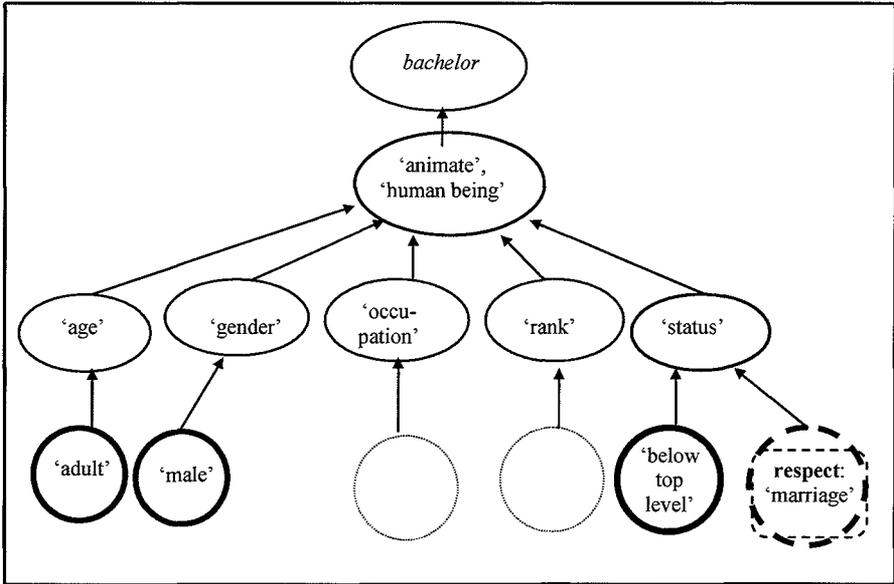
- 1386 CHAUCER *Merch. T.* 34 Bacheleris [*v.r.* bachilers, -elerys, -elers, -illiers] haue often peyne and wo.

- 1450 *Songs & Carols* (1847) 35 If thou be a bachelor, And bryngest hom a wyfe.

1547 J. HARRISON *Exhort. Scottes* 223 She was to olde a mayde for so yonge a bachelor.

1553 T. WILSON *Rhet.* 24 The syngle lyfe of Bacchelaures.

Stage 4a. An unmarried man (of marriageable age).



The view of marriage as a highly esteemed institution meant that it applied to all ranks and walks of life. Therefore, the attributes of these values are empty.

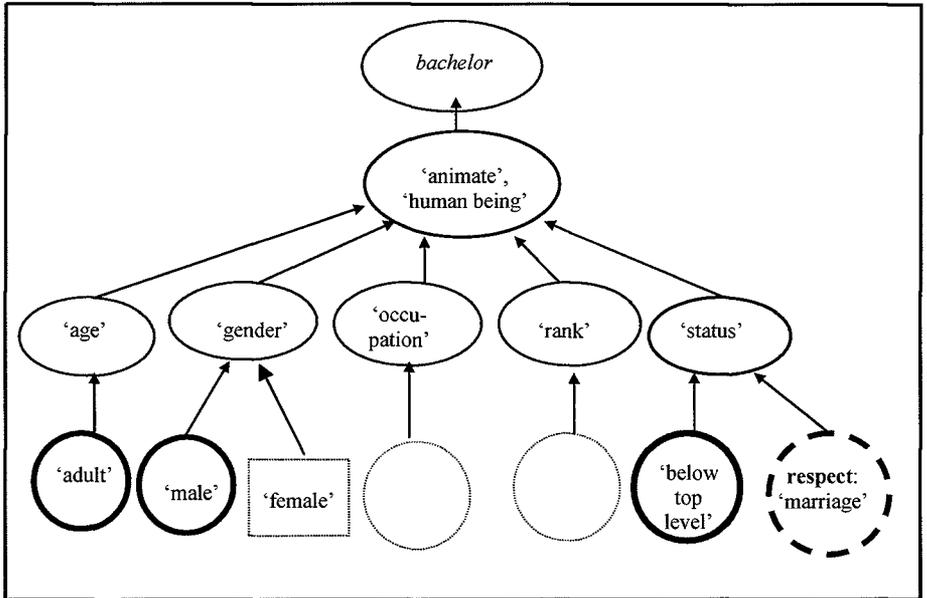
Bachelor was also applied to women (a sense which is now obsolete):

5. A maid, a single woman. *Obs. rare.*

1632 B. JONSON *Magnet. Lady* ii. i, He would keep you A batchelor still. And keep you not alone without a husband, But in a sickness.

As men were the prototypical referents of *bachelor*, 'female' is symbolised here as a non-prototypical value of 'gender'.

Stage 4b. An unmarried woman (of marriageable age)

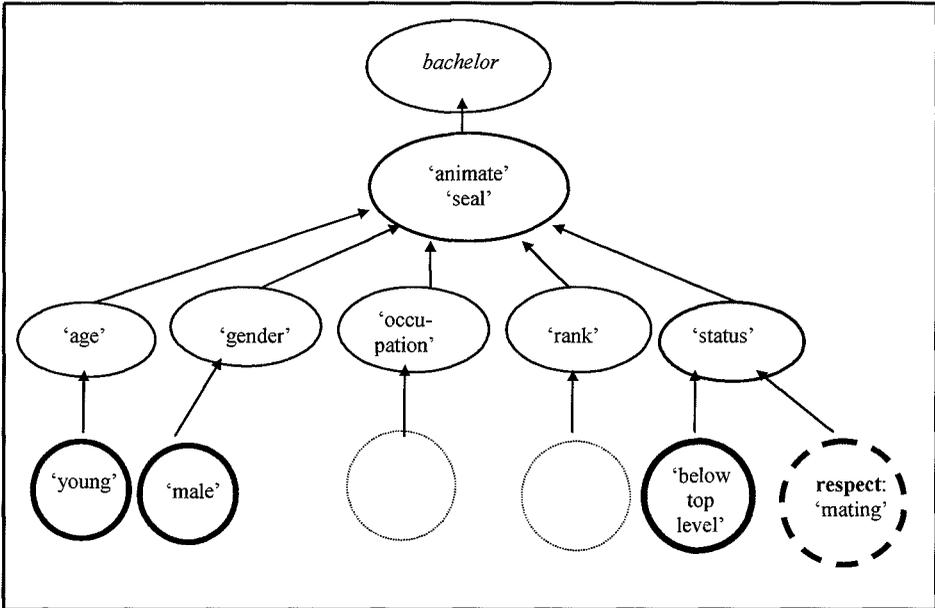


The use of *bachelor* to designate inferior status in terms of finding a mate has then been transferred to another species (4c):

4c. *transf.* One of the young male fur-seals which are kept away from the breeding-grounds by the adult bulls. (These are the seals which may legally be killed for their fur.)

1874 *Harper's Monthly Mag.* May 801/2 To the right and left of the breeding grounds stretch sand-beaches..upon which the 'hollus-chickie', or the bachelor seals, lie by tens of thousands.

Stage 4c. A male seal below mating age



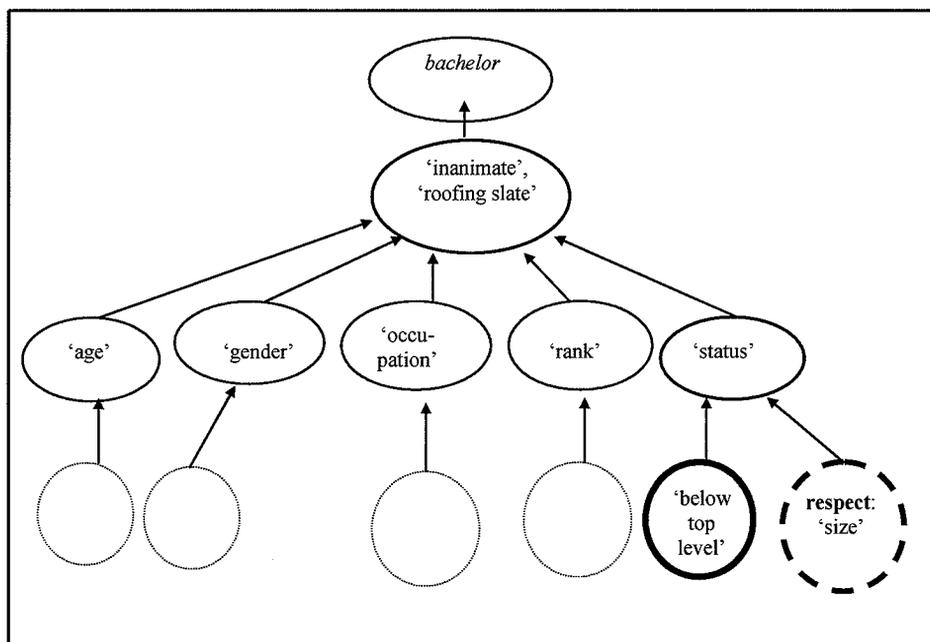
From this sense, *bachelor* has moved outside the animal domain so that, in the below sense (5), an inanimate object is termed a *bachelor* because of its (relatively) small size.

5. A size of roofing slate (see quot. 1929).

1914 M. S. GRETTON *Corner of Cotswolds* ix. 175 The tiles for our roofs are called, according to their sizes, long wivets, long bachelors, short bachelors, longbecks..muffities, long days, and short days.

1929 N. LLOYD *Building Craftsmanship* x. 93/1 Sizes of slates, measuring from centre of peg hole to tail, in inches, are Long bachelors 11 Short bachelors 10½.

Stage 5. A small roofing slate



As pointed out elsewhere (Persson 2002), *spinster* has long been on the way out of the lexicon because of its negative axiological sense.⁶ However, there seems to be a need for having a term for single women, and *bachelor-girl* (or *woman*) has come to serve as one substitute:

5. bachelor girl, woman, an unmarried woman who has her own income and lives independently; also (*rare*) *bachelor-lady*, *-maid*;

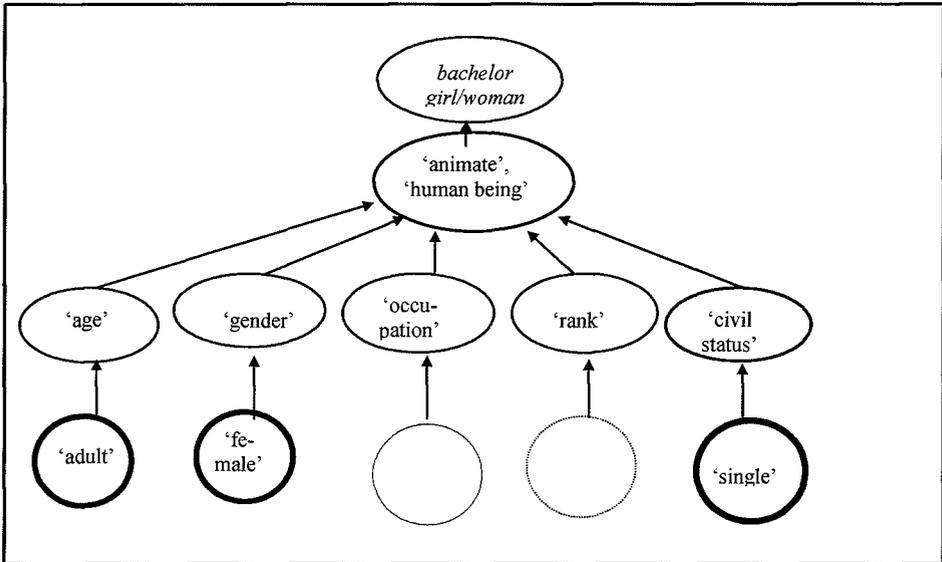
1894 C. C. HARRISON (*title*) *A Bachelor Maid*.

1895 *Dialect Notes* I. 396 *Bachelor-girl*, a maiden lady.

1955 *Amer. Speech* XXX 298. A way of living no doubt explains *bachelor girl* and not any consideration of gender.

The semantic profile of this usage looks as follows:

Stage 6. Bachelor girl/woman



'Single' is chosen as the value of 'civil status' rather than 'unmarried' whose axiological sense is negative, implying the absence of the desired state, marriage. On the other hand, *bachelor-girl/woman* does not seem to be popular because of its analogy with single men.⁷

Discussion

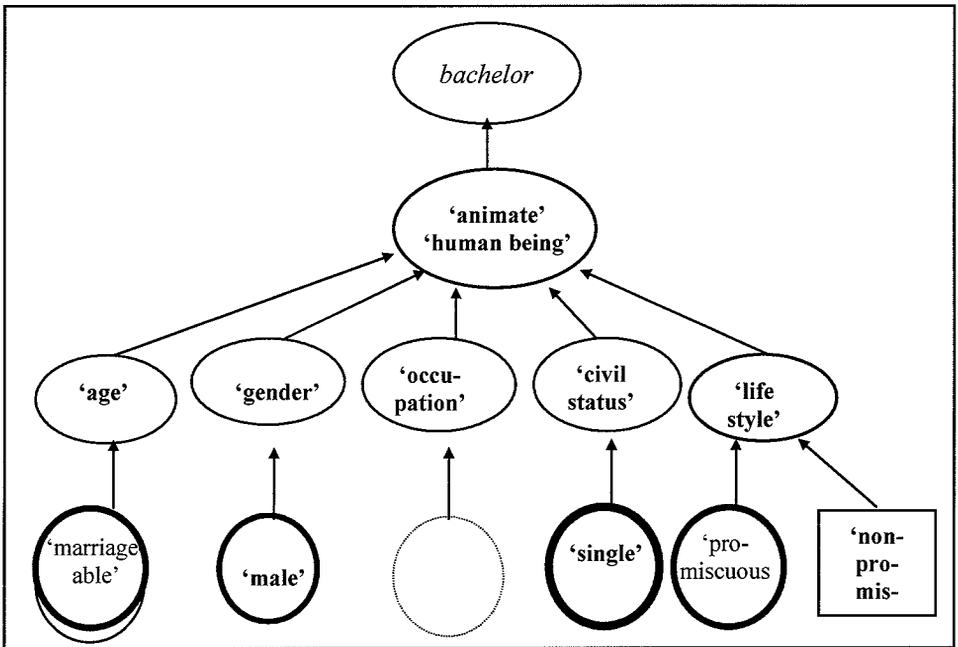
I submit that the above analysis indicates that a multiplicity of senses of *bachelor* stem from a single value, namely 'below top level' of the attribute 'status'. This value has been central to the proliferation of senses. This is not indicated by dictionaries.⁸ But it goes to show that sense developments may derive from one single element in the total meaning of a word.

While all senses of *bachelor* discussed above are based on the central idea of 'not quite good (mature, or large) enough for a particular purpose', there is nowadays a different concept of a bachelor as a single man, free to engage in love affairs unfettered by marriage. G. Lakoff (1987: 85) puts it as follows: "The stereotypical bachelor is macho, dates a lot of dif-

ferent women, is interested in sexual conquest, hangs out in singles bars, etc.” This has also led to a widening semantic gap between *spinster* and *bachelor* as gender-based equivalents (see Romaine 1999: 91-93).

In the semantic frame illustrating this, there is therefore no value indicating inferior status for bachelor:

Stage 6. The modern bachelor stereotype



In order to check whether this sense of bachelor is popular, I searched *Collins Wordbanks Online English Corpus* (56 million words) for prenominal adjectival attributes of *bachelor*, since I assumed that frequent adjectival collocations may reveal widespread attitudes to the referents of the headword (see further Persson 1990). The collocates have been divided into four types: positive, neutral, patronising, and negative. Since the neutral use, despite its high frequency, is irrelevant to this discussion, the 44 terms are not listed individually:

Table 1
Prenominal attributes collocating with bachelor
in Collins Wordbanks Online

Positive	Neutral	Patronising	Negative
affluent	e. g. bearded	needy	bluff
beautiful		poor	eccentric
carefree			ever-suspicious
charming			lonely
contented			mad (2)
eligible (6)			militant
favourite			old-fashioned
feisty			rampant
friendly			raving
handsome (3)			reclusive
loveable			savage
mysterious			screaming
self-reliant			
wealthy (2)			
terms: 14	terms: 44	terms: 2	terms: 12
tokens: 22	tokens: 50	tokens: 2	tokens: 13

These results indicate that traditional and modern views of bachelorhood co-exist. The new stereotype is mirrored by the positive terms whereas the patronising and negative terms reflect the traditional view. Neutral terms - and their high frequency - are not of interest in this context.

In the long perspective, it will be interesting to see whether the new sense of *bachelor* and the emerging positive sense of *spinster* in the USA

(see Persson 2002) will eventually make the two terms match again and eliminate the present-day semantic discrepancy between them.

Notes

1. Leech (1981:13) takes a disparaging view of connotative meaning, which, as opposed to conceptual meaning, he claims "is relatively unstable" and "indeterminate and open-ended". It is therefore interesting to note that John Stuart Mill (1879: 33-6, quoted in Ullmann 1962: 74) claimed that "whenever the names given to objects convey any information, that is, whenever they have properly any meaning, the meaning resides not in what they *denote*, but in what they *connote*. The only names of objects which connote nothing are *proper* names; and these have, strictly speaking, no signification." Mill's view is not unlike that held by cognitive linguists.
2. A case in point is *gay*, whose "connotation" 'addicted to social pleasures and dissipations' (*OED*) eventually gave rise to the now established meaning 'homosexual'. Of a place: frequented by homosexuals' (*OED*).
3. According to the *OED* *bachelor* stems from Old French *bachelier* whose ultimate source is Latin *baccalaris*, of doubtful origin. The original meaning being uncertain, the sense development is also doubtful.
4. *Foyne* (*foin*) = 'fur of polecat'; *budge* = 'a kind of fur, consisting of lamb's skin with the wool dressed outwards' (*OED*).
5. The traditional view of marriage was of course deeply rooted in the Christian religion. In the Bible we find several passages strongly urging people to marry, e.g. "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh" (Genesis 2: 24). and "Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge" (Hebrews 13: 4).
6. However, a revival of *spinster* as a positive in-group term seems to be going on in the U.S. among single career women (see Persson 2002).
7. *Bachelorette* is considered even worse because of its diminutive suffix, which somehow implicates that a single woman is a smaller version of a single man. A British woman told me, "I would much rather be called *spinster* than *bachelorette*."
8. I did not see these connections myself until I had started this analysis.

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