Vanilla

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Vanilla is a word that I thought at one point, was simply the name of a plant species. I knew the extract of the vanilla plant was used for numerous reasons like flavoring my lip balm, adding depth and dimension to perfume, and making chocolate chip cookies taste better. However as I began my research it became evident that vanilla stands to mean so much more than just a type of plant species. It has shifted from being understood as a description of an actual flavor, to meaning plain or boring, usually not in reference to flavor at all. I first became aware of vanilla meaning more when I asked my sorority sisters what they thought of when I said the word “vanilla.” Most of the sorority members had similar thoughts to mine about vanilla, but one specific sorority sister had a different take on it. Her first response was “Vanilla men are alright, but I think you need some chocolate in your life.” This was the beginning of my realization that vanilla is used as a descriptive word in different settings amongst people. Vanilla has shifted to mean plain or boring in some settings, when in all actuality, it is a plant with a very strong flavor and smell. The difference between what vanilla is literally and what it has become to mean in various social cultures has led my research to figure out why this divergence from vanilla in a literal sense has happened.

Vanilla is descended from the Spanish word vainilla, or “vanilla plant,” which literally means, “little pod.” Spanish settlers discovered the plant in the 1500’s upon landing in southeastern Mexico and named it from the shape of the pods. Vainilla is diminutive of vaina, or “sheath,” which comes from the Latin word for sheath, vagina (www.etymonline.com). Vanilla has come a long way from its literal meaning, to its metaphorical meaning of describing something as plain or boring.

Most of the entries in the Oxford English Dictionary match the so-called “typical” and literal meaning of vanilla. The first few entries describe vanilla as “a pod produced by one or other species of the genus Vanilla...” or “the climbing orchid Vanilla planifolia, or other species related to this; the tropical (American) genus to which these belong.” These definitions were used in written context as early as the 1600’s. The OED does not document vanilla as “plain, basic, conventional; (esp. of a computer, program, or other
product) having no interesting or unusual feature; safe, unadventurous,” until the 1970’s. Even though the OED doesn’t list vanilla being used in a different cultural sense until the 1970’s, there is evidence of it being used in a manner not describing flavor as early as the 1940’s.

A LIFE magazine article from 1942 provides an example of vanilla being used to describe something other than flavor. The article was titled “Willkie Evolves a Plain Vanilla Foreign Policy for Republicans,” (36). It is important to realize that the phrase “plain vanilla” is being used in a very popular magazine that denotes and captures much of what is going on in the world and also popular American culture. The phrase “plain vanilla” would not have been chosen if the readers of the magazine were not familiar with the descriptive choice of words. It can be inferred that vanilla began to shift from a description of an actual flavor to something meaning plain or boring before the 1940s.

As mentioned earlier, the Oxford English Dictionary does not note vanilla taking on a meaning to describe things as plain or boring until the 1970’s. This “new” meaning of vanilla is stated within the 1997 draft additions: “used orig. with reference to sexual activity (esp. in vanilla sex).” Most of the examples that the OED lists are all describing something sexual like “vanilla bar, a gay bar that is not SM” (Rodgers, 184), which happens to be pulled from Queens’ Vernacular, a dictionary defining gay slang from the 1970’s. It is interesting to note that most of the OED quotes pertaining to “plain” or “ordinary” are in reference to gay and lesbian sexual behaviors. The Ngram (shown below) for vanilla shows a definite increase of vanilla being used in printed text through the 1970’s, which happens to be a big period for gay rights. Such a significant increase of the word vanilla in the 1970’s brings me to wonder the correlation between vanilla and the culture of the time and how it is used.

The 1970’s were a monumental time period for homosexual people (who are also referred to as the LGBT community). Prior to the 1970’s, people who identified as homosexual were penalized and treated differently (Cruikshank, 2). This was a decade where movements for gay rights really took off. More and more individuals were open about their sexual
preference and really pushed for equality amongst society. This was a period that included the first official gay pride parade (June 28, 1970) and when the American Psychiatric Association voted to not consider homosexuality a mental illness in 1973 (www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/timeline/stonewall/). These events were spurred because society was attempting to accept a new culture being brought into the mix.

The continuing openness of the LGBT community not only brought about the need for different cultural and political events, but also created a new social scene. As it was noted earlier, there is a text sample of vanilla being used to describe a gay bar that is not SM (Rodgers, 184). SM refers to “sado-masochism, a combination of the words sadism, meaning to take pleasure in inflicting pain on others, and masochism, to take pleasure in pain inflicted on you,” as an eloquent entry on Urban Dictionary puts it. Wayne Dynes also uses vanilla in a similar fashion in Homolexis when describing SM aficionados who “dismiss gays of simpler tastes as mere fluffs, who limit themselves to timid exercises in vanilla sex” (Dynes, 123). The LGBT community uses the standardized meaning of vanilla to describe sex or gathering places as plain or boring. One of the many possible reasons the LGBT community probably used vanilla as their choice description is because it seemed innocent. The homosexual community was already, and continues, to face much hostility from general society. Why would they use a descriptive word that would only draw more negative attention to their personal lives? Also, vanilla was and is probably used amongst the LGBT community because it had already been standardized by American society. As it was discussed earlier, people began to standardize vanilla to mean plain or boring since before the 1940’s. It would only make sense for the LGBT community to use a descriptive word that is already common amongst the society they are attempting to be equal members of.

The LGBT community circa the 1970’s and present day, is not exclusive in using vanilla as a description for sex. The Urban Dictionary has numerous current entries for vanilla, one example from 2003 being: “straight down the line, boring sex...” This entry is non-specific in regards to the word being used in a homosexual content. Both homosexual and heterosexual individuals probably use vanilla to describe sex for similar reasons mentioned before, like it seeming innocent and already being standardized. I would even go far as to say that some individuals might use vanilla to describe his or her sexual encounter, to seem polite. Some individuals may consider “boring” or “plain” as an insult, where saying the sex was “vanilla” at least makes it sound interesting and neither good or bad, just average.

The meaning of vanilla has expanded tremendously since the 1500’s, even beyond its adaptation to being a description for something plain or boring. Vanilla is even used to describe racial differences. The title of a research article discussing the shift of white individuals moving from the highly African American populated Detroit, to suburbs around the city says it all: “Chocolate City, Vanilla Suburbs: Will the Trend toward Racially Separate Communities Continue?” (Bianchi, Colasanto, Farley, Hatchett, Schuman, pg. 1). The classification of individuals based on race, seems to be a perpetual occurrence. Since
Europeans first settled America, there has been segregation amongst peoples of different skin color. It seems society establishes differences amongst groups of people at all points of American history.

It is interesting to note that the “pod-like” plant for which *Vanilla* originally got its name from is not white in color, yet people choose to use *vanilla* as word to describe white skin tones. Yes the blossom of the plant is white in color, but the actual appearance for which *Vanilla* is named, is not white. Nor, is the extract that most people are familiar with. The eventual standardization of a word leaves society with uneducated members; people do not realize the knowledge behind the words they speak, that make up their languages. This exemplifies how disassociated people are with the goods they are consuming. Our consumer driven economy leads to a society potentially not ever knowing what the original form of a resource or word they use every day.

*Vanilla* continues to be used in numerous social settings to describe things as plain or boring due to its standardization in America. The word vanilla has even made its way into the world of business. The phrase “plain vanilla bond” is used to describe a United States issued bond that has “(a) a fixed date (maturity or expiry date) when the amount borrowed (the principal or face value) is due, and (b) the contractual amount of interest which typically is paid every six months in the US and once a year on the European continent” (bizterms.net). “Plain vanilla” used on its own, refers to a swap or derivative financial instrument that is issued with standard features (bizterms.net). It seems like *vanilla* is used in a way to make financial deals seem more approachable or safe. I think this is very representative of the financial burdens our society has gone through. America has had 2 stock market crashes, both ending with our economy struggling to get back on its feet. People who witnessed these crashes are probably more likely to invest in something labeled “vanilla” or low risk, because they have less to lose. On the other end of it, businessmen see these “vanilla” investments as boring, because they would rather be dealing with higher-risk financial deals to turn more of a profit. Regardless, the head businessmen of the finance and business departments recognize that they need to somehow appeal to a society that has been hurt economically before.

We are well into the 21st century, and vanilla still continues to be chosen as a descriptive word for even potential significant discoveries in the field of physics. Physicists had thought they had discovered a boson particle, but it turned out to be “pretty vanilla” ([http://io9.com/](http://io9.com/)). Basically the physicists were not impressed with the final results of a test, deeming it a boring, or “vanilla,” particle in their world of physics.

I never realized a word as simple as vanilla could be used in so many different contexts. Since its first debut in the 1500’s, vanilla has underwent a major shift in meaning, from something that describes a flavor to something that describes a color or means boring, plain, or standard. The development of *vanilla* has shown that “the longer a word is embedded in the language, the more likely it is to develop transferred or figurative uses...
“(Knowles, 135). The different uses of the word vanilla have shown insight into the different contexts it was and continues to be used in.

I now better understand the statement: “vanilla men are alright, but I think you need some chocolate in your life,” from my sorority sister when I asked about the word vanilla. I understand now that vanilla is used in so many ways because of the standardization our society places upon vanilla, and among other words too. I now question what other words have a similar history like vanilla. I think it is important to note also, that all of this information pertaining to the definition of vanilla is strictly based in the United States. It would be beneficial to find any differences the word might have in other nations. Obviously not every nation has the same cultural history, so it is very possible that vanilla could have diverged from its original meaning in a completely different way. People in China may not have a clue what someone from America is talking about when they talk about a “vanilla” course at school. I think a shift in meaning of different words like vanilla, is unavoidable. Like William Safire wrote in his article, On Language: Forewords March: “Here, then, is a word coming to mean in slang the opposite of its standard meaning. Farewell, tasty vanilla.”

References


http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amERICANexPERIENCE/features/timELine/stonewall/

