Agnieszka GRZĄŚKO
University of Rzeszów

mgrzasko@op.pl

WHO IS A SEDUCTRESS? A COGNITIVE APPROACH TO THE SYNONYMS OF *SEDUCTRESS*

Abstract: In the history of English there have been a number of terms referring to a mysterious and enticing lady whose charm entraps her lovers, frequently leading them into dangerous situations. Indubitably, femme fatale is an archetype of such a female both in literature and art. Her ability to enchant and hypnotize males was in the earliest stories even seen as supernatural, therefore nowadays such ladies are associated with vampires, witches or even demons.

The main aim of the paper is to discuss the semantic history of a handful of lexical items that might be used in the sense 'a seductive woman' and analyse them from a cognitive angle. In particular, we shall focus on such simple words as *siren*, derivatives *seductress* and *enchantress*, two borrowings, that is *femme fatale* and *coquette*, one abbreviation, namely *vamp* and – last but not least – a handful of proper nouns, namely *Circe*, *Lorelei* and *Jezebel*.

Key words: seductress, woman, cognitive approach, etymology

Introduction

A woman is a human being who is the embodiment of a negative principle. On the one hand, she symbolizes chaos, temptation, debauchery, disorder and disagreement, on the other hand she is a paragon of fecundity, diversity and beauty. There are a number of various and frequently mutually exclusive portrayals of women, thus it is impossible to characterize a woman by means of one word only. Goddesses, virgins, mothers, daughters, sinners, priestesses, these are only a few of the images that are recognizable in many cultures (see Kopaliński 1990).

In what follows we shall pay meticulous attention to one of the above-mentioned representations, namely the image of a seductress, therefore we shall provide the reader with a handful of lexical items which might be employed in the sense 'a seductive woman', divide them into groups and discuss their etymology. But, above all, we shall search for the distinctive features of all these words and on the basis of them formulate metaphorical patterns.

First and foremost, let us present the division of the analysed terms from the morphological viewpoint. Our list consists of only one simple word (*siren*), two derivatives (*enchantress* and *seductress*), two borrowings from French (a derivative *coquette* and a compound *femme fatale*), one abbreviation (*vamp* from *vampire*) and three proper nouns (*Circe*, *Jezebel* and *Lorelei*[1]). Following the data provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (henceforth: *the OED*), we may say that these words which denote seductive females[2] appeared in English quite late. This may be the reason why none of these words has fallen into oblivion and all of them may be found in the dictionaries of contemporary English.

simple words	derivatives	borrowings	abbreviation	proper nouns
siren (1340 → 1588)	*enchantress* (1374 → 1713)	*coquette* (1611)	*vamp* (1911)	*Circe* (1386 → ?)
	seductress (1803)	*femme fatale* (1912)		*Jezebel* (1558 → ?)
				Lorelei (1878 → ?)

Table 1: Division of lexical items whose senses are connected with the conceptual category SEDUCTIVE FEMALE.

As far as the methodology of the paper is concerned, we shall adopt selected elements of the cognitive approach presented in the works of Lakoff (1987), Taylor (1992), Langacker (1987) and Kleparski (1997). By 'conceptual category', we comprehend a 'structure' embodied in our conceptual systems, which derive from bodily experience, by means of which we understand such notions as, for example, body movement or the way we perceive reality (see Lakoff 1987 and Taylor 1992). For instance, in this paper we aim to focus on the lexical items whose senses are associated with the conceptual category SEDUCTIVE FEMALE.

Speaking of the notion of 'domains', we understand it as "a coherent area of conceptualization relative to which semantic units may be characterized" (Langacker 1987: 488). For instance, COLOURS is the semantic domain by

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[1] As far as proper nouns are concerned, it is very difficult to pinpoint the exact date when the lexical items acquired the novel sense 'a seductive woman', thus we provide the reader with the dates when they were first documented in English.

[2] For more on the subject of synonyms of women, see Kleparski (1997).

means of which we apprehend such lexical items as *blue, red, green* or *yellow*. In our scrutiny – apart from the very obvious domain of SEX – by and large we revolve around five conceptual domains, namely the domain of PHYSICAL APPEARANCE, the domain of CHARACTER AND BEHAVIOUR, the domain of CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES, the domain of MORALITY and the domain of FEELINGS. For all these domains we may speak about conceptual/attributive elements/values which are either activated or backgrounded.

Siren

According to Greek mythology[3], sirens were dangerous female creatures endowed with exquisite voices that enticed sailors in order to take their lives, thus we may say that these imaginary beings, half-women and half-birds were a source of misfortune for males. Latin and Greek poets[4] depicted them as alluring nymphs whose voices made seamen forget about the whole world, and – as a result – the men perished. According to Homeric mythology, the Sirens were believed to have been the three daughters of the Greek god Phorcu. Authors argue about whether there were two or three comely ladies. According to Homeric mythology, there were two names, however, other – especially – later sources provide the readers with the names of three females: Parthenope, Ligea and Leucosia. In fact, the number of sirens was further enlarged: "there were several sirens up and down the coast (…) but the greatest number lived in Capreae."[5]

It is fitting to add that there are two distinct images of sirens: in some cultures (e.g. Polish, French, Spanish and Portuguese) they were believed to combine fish and females, whereas in others (e.g. Greek, Russian and Swedish) they were portrayed as half-females and half-birds. All in all, in spite of the fact that they might cause various misunderstandings, these two images are related and advert to the same treacherous creature.

Historically speaking, the noun *siren* stems from the Greek lexical item *seirēn* which – according to the *OED* – appeared in English in the second half of the 14th century. In medieval times, the nymphs in question were the embodiment of lethal temptation, but it was in the 17th century that the term started to be employed with reference to seductive women whose glance was compared to that of the mythical creature of the basilisk, and voice to a siren's singing, whereas flawless physics led men astray and brought about their death. Having scoured various lexicographic works, there emerges a picture of a dangerous,

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[3] See Grimal (1998).

[4] See *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*.

[5] See *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* and *Word and Phrase Origins*.

sexy, fascinating and wilful lady who aims at hurting males (see *Word and Phrase Origins*, *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* and *Thesaurus of Traditional English Metaphors*).

Within the cognitively-couched model of analysis employed in this paper, the account of the secondary figurative sense 'a seductive woman' of the noun *siren* involves the highlighting of the positively-loaded conceptual elements SEXY, ALLURING, BEAUTIFUL, IRRESISTIBLE and FASCINATING forming parts of the attributive paths of such conceptual domains as the domain of PHYSICAL APPEARANCE and the domain of CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES, respectively, attended by the highlighting of the relevant location within the attributive path of the domain of CHARACTER AND BEHAVIOUR with the evaluatively negative element DANGEROUS being activated.

Enchantress

The derivative *enchantress* is one of the lexical items whose sense is associated with witchcraft. Before the term started to be employed with reference to seductive females, it had referred to sorceresses. This historically primary sense of the word in question appeared in English in the second half of the 14th century in the Chaucer's translation of Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiæ*,[6] where the noun way employed in the sense 'a witch' (1374 "O feble and lyȝt is þe hand of Circes þe enchaunteresse."[7] (the *OED*)). However, in the course of time it slightly altered its meaning and since the first half of the 18th century it has alluded to all charming women (1713 "There shalt thou meet Of soft Enchantresses th' Enchantments sweet." → 1866–8 "The girl he loved was the most capricious little enchantress." (the *OED*)).

From the cognitive perspective, to explicate the secondary 'seductive' female-specific sense of *enchantress*, we may talk about highlighting of such conceptual elements as CHARMING, IRRESISTIBLE and BEWITCHING presupposed for the attributive path of the domain of CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES.

Seductress

In turn, the history of the second derivative dates back to the very beginning of the 19th century, when the female version of *seducer* was coined (1803 "He is accompanied by an army of constables to apprehend the seductress of his nephew". → 1891 "They were seductresses for inducing him to drink wine." (the

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[6] See the *OED*.
[7] "Feeble and light is the hand of Circes the enchantress."

OED)). The noun comes from the verb *to seduce* which describes the activity of persuading somebody – by and large a lady – to lose her innocence.

Nevertheless, the historically primary sense of the verb was by no means connected with sexuality. Admittedly, according to the *OED*, the late 15th century sense of the word adverted to the activity of persuading, but it referred to males (e.g. vassals, servants or soldiers) who were supposed to desert their allegiance (1477 "Zethephius seduised the pepel ayenst him by tyraunye."[8] (the *OED*)). It was circa forty years later when the meaning of the verb was extended to the activities whose aim was to coax someone into some wrongdoing (1519– 20 "He was nocht compellit, sedoussit nor coacit thar to."[9] (see the *OED*)). Nowadays, the verb *to seduce* is almost always used with sexual overtones.

Cognitively speaking, to explicate the sense of *seductress* one may posit an entrenchment link to the domain of CHARACTER AND BEHAVIOUR, for which the conceptual element NAUGHTY is clearly activated. Additionally, we may also speak about an entrenchment link to the domain of PHYSICAL APPEARANCE for which the conceptual value ALLURING is activated.

Coquette

It was at the beginning of the 17th century that the French lexical item *coquette* was first documented in English. Following *Word and Phrase Origins*, taking into consideration the provenance of *coquette*, we may say that the lexical item in question is oddly inappropriate, because it stems from the French *coquet* which denotes a lecherous man who strutted about. In fact, *coquette* is a diminutive form of *coquet* and it literally refers to a female who is a 'little cock'.

In English, the term has always alluded rather to a young lady well acquainted with the art of flirtation, owing to which she could effortlessly draw men's admiration. Renowned for trifling with boys' feelings, such a girl does it habitually merely for gratification of her insatiable appetite for males. In spite of holding gentlemen's attention, a coquette teases them without the aim of responding to their feelings. The following quotations extracted from the *OED* testify to the sense in question:

> 1611 "Coquette, a prattling or proud gossip; a frisking or fliperous minx; a cocket". → 1829 "Amorously eyeing the pretty coquet".

From the cognitive angle, to account for the sense of the noun we can speak about an entrenchment link to the domain of CHARACTER AND BEHAVIOUR for which such negatively-loaded conceptual values as VAIN, BRASH and

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[8] "Zethepius seduced those opposed to him through tyranny."
[9] "He was not completely seduced or coaxed."

PLAYFUL are foregrounded. Moreover, we can also speak of the highlighting of the attributive element YOUNG presupposed for the attributive path of the domain of AGE and the activation of the attributive value ALLURING presupposed for the attributive path of the domain of PHYSICAL APPEARANCE.

Femme fatale

According to the *OED*, a femme fatale is a stock character of a dangerously attractive and enigmatic female who can seduce any man. The archetype of a tempting woman who seems to possess supernatural powers originates from ancient beliefs, and the first such characters may be encountered in the Bible, history, mythology or legends. As to the provenance of the phrase, it goes back to French and literally means 'a deadly or fatal woman', that is one who attempts to attain her goal by using her femininity. In English, the borrowing defined as 'a dangerously attractive woman' emerged at the beginning of the 20th century, which might be testified by means of the following quotation extracted from the *OED* macrostructure: 1912 "Here I saw a Femme Fatale who was a fine figure of a woman."

Among the first famous examples of demonic ladies we can find Cleopatra from Classical times, the Sirens, Aphrodite and Helen of Troy from myths and legends as well as Jezebel and Salome from the Bible. But it should be stressed that the femme fatale has become a symbol which has alluring representatives in all periods. And so, to mention only a few of them, in the Middle Ages Morgan le Fay was one of the most famous seductresses, the Romantic period may boast a number of notable instances of treacherous females, such as Lamia from Keats's narrative poem.[10] There were numerous powerful women in gothic novels, for example Matilda from *The Monk*,[11] who was the inspiration of the Marquis de Sade's novel *Juliette*.[12]

Cognitively speaking, in order to account for the semantics of the analysed combination, we find grounds to posit an entrenchment link to the attributive paths of such conceptual domains as the domain of CHARACTER AND BEHAVIOUR, with the attributive elements DANGEROUS and VILLAINOUS activated, the domain of PHYSICAL APPEARANCE, for which the attributive elements BEAUTIFUL, SEXY and ALLURING are brought to the fore, and – last but not least – the domain of CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES, in which the attributive element MYSTERIOUS gains prominence.

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[10] See Keats (1884) http://www.bartleby.com/126/36.html.
[11] See Lewis (1976).
[12] See de Sade ([1797] 1997).

Vamp

Stories about supernatural creatures of a pernicious nature which were believed to suck the blood of their sleeping victims have been part and parcel of Eastern Europe's folklore for a few centuries (see *500 Years of New Words*), but the noun *vampire* itself was documented in English in the first half of the 18th century (1734 "These Vampyres are supposed to be the Bodies of deceased Persons, animated by evil Spirits, which come out of the Graves, in the Night-time, suck the Blood of many of the Living, and thereby destroy them".) (the *OED*). As to the provenance of the word in English, the sources are not consistent. Some claim that the lexical item derives either from French *vampire* or German *vampir* (see *Word Origins*) or from the Serbian *vampir* and it reached England because of three men who had travelled through Eastern Europe (see *500 Years of New Words*).

According to *Word Origins*, it took almost two centuries until the lexical item acquired a more human-specific, or – to be more precise – female-specific sense and started to allude to women whose intention is to lure and take advantage of men. Since the 19th century the image of a seductive vamp that exploits men has been used in the movie industry a number of times (1911 "Thackeray took it for granted that Mary Stuart was a vamp". → 1976 "She was playing the Vamp in a film." (the *OED*)).

For the construal of the sense 'a dangerous, mysterious and seductive female' of the noun in question such CDs as the domain of PHYSICAL APPEARANCE and the domain of CHARACTER AND BEHAVIOUR may be said to be involved as the attributive paths of the following conceptual values are respectively activated: SEXY, DANGEROUS and CRUEL, the last two of which are naturally presupposed by the attributive path of the latter CD.

Circe

In Greek and Latin mythology Circe was a cruel lady renowned for her thorough knowledge of herbs and potions by means of which she was able to intoxicate men and turn her enemies into animals. Though she might seem to have been a sorceress, she was in fact a goddess who knew how to gain power over the male kind. Given her exceptional beauty and abilities one could hardly remain indifferent to her charm and skills, thus she became the archetype of the predatory woman whose name nowadays adverts to dangerous and irresistibly fascinating females (see *Word and Phrase Origins*). The lexical item emerged in English at the close of the 16th century (1590 "I thinke you all haue drunke of Circes cup." (the *OED*)) and we may hazard a guess that since then it has been employed in the sense 'a seductress'.

From the cognitive angle, the semantics of the proper noun in question provides a case of entrenchment to the attributive paths of such conceptual domains as the domain of PHYSICAL APPEARANCE for which the attributive elements BEAUTIFUL and ALLURING are activated, the domain of CHARACTER AND BEHAVIOUR with the activation of the attributive elements CRUEL and DANGEROUS and the domain of CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES for which the attributive elements INTELLIGENT, IRRESISTIBLE and FASCINATING are highlighted.

Jezebel

Jezebel is the infamous Biblical character that prompted her husband to desist from worshipping Yahweh and encouraged him to venerate other deities, namely Baal and Asherah instead. So wicked were the ways of the worshipper of the former deity that they were claimed to have brought misfortune upon Israel (see *Word and Phrase Origins*). Jezebel herself is reported to have tempted men with her painted eyes and adorned head. By means of intrigues and seduction she was able to mislead the saints of God into the sin of indecency. Therefore, because of her dishonourable behaviour, the name of the woman started to be employed figuratively with reference to a fallen woman, one flaunting her loose morals, or – to be more precise – a prostitute (see *Word and Phrase Origins*). Various lexicographic works (see *Traditional Thesaurus of English Metaphors*) agree that Jezebel has been employed allusively for a bold, dangerous and promiscuous female for a very long time.

Interestingly enough, the name Jezebel is also a cultural symbol, as it refers to a racist stereotype of Black women. To be more precise, Jezebel was the counter-image of the flawless Victorian female from the middle of the 19th century. Black women were regarded as promiscuous not because they were actually lewd, but because they were not accustomed to the European climate (see *Word and Phrase Origins*). Thus, prim and proper Europeans confused semi-nudity with corruption. Moreover, Europeans did not understand African polygamy, which was connoted with lust and uncontrolled sex drive. This unjust mindset gave the impression that African females could not accuse any white man of rape, because black women were reportedly dissolute and wanton.

In terms of a cognitively-couched model of analysis, for the construal of the sense 'a seductress' of the proper noun in question, such conceptual domain as the domain of MORALITY and the domain of CHARACTER AND BEHAVIOUR may be said to be involved as the attributive paths of the following conceptual values are respectively activated LEWD, PROMISCUOUS, UNCHASTE, DANGEROUS and BRASH, the last three of which are naturally presupposed by the attributive path of the latter conceptual domain. Moreover, we may also

postulate that the sense in question may be rendered in terms of an entrenchment link to the domain of PHYSICAL APPEARANCE for which the conceptual element ADORNED is clearly foregrounded. In turn, in order to account for the stereotypical metaphorical sense 'a black promiscuous female' we may speak of the highlighting of the conceptual element BLACK presupposed for the attributive path of the domain of RACE.

Lorelei

Legend[13] has it that centuries ago there was a beautiful young maiden dwelling on the rock cliff Lorelei.[14] It is said that there was a girl who had leaped into the river below and drowned because of her unfaithful lover. The girl was metamorphosed into a siren that beguiled sailors with her singing and charm. The unfortunate who glanced at her were deprived of reason or sight, whereas the poor who heard her singing were doomed never to rejoin the living (see *Word and Phrase Origins*). The name of the appealing fair-haired lady from the German tale appeared in English as late as in the second part of the 19th century and soon started to be employed with reference to beautiful, but – at the same time – cruel, unhappy and vindictive women (1878 "The Loreley of the Rhine is only a river-siren, though a more exquisite enchantress than ever Greek fancy conceived". → 1971 "She evolved into the most devastating Lorelei of Mayfair, with an utterly intriguing contempt for the men she could so easily fetter." (the *OED*)).

Therefore, cognitively speaking, the historically secondary sense of the proper noun Lorelei is explicable in terms of an entrenchment relation to the attributive path of the domain of CHARACTER AND BEHAVIOUR and the highlighting of the attributive elements DANGEROUS, MERCILESS and VINDICTIVE attended by the activation of the conceptual elements DEJECTED, HEARTBROKEN and UNHAPPY forming parts of the attributive path of the domain of FEELINGS. Additionally, one may posit an entrenchment link to the domain of PHYSICAL APPEARANCE for which the conceptual element BEAUTIFUL is brought to the fore.

Conclusions

In view of the foregoing, we can draw a number of conclusions connected with the semantics of the discussed lexical items. And so, table 2 presents a list of the conceptual elements and division of the domains in the analysis:

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[13] See *Word and Phrase Origins*.
[14] The Lorelei is a rock on the river Rhine in the Upper Middle Rhine Valley in Germany.

domain of analysed lexical item	PHYSICAL APPEARANCE	CHARACTER-ISTIC FEATURES	CHARACTER AND BEHAVIOUR	MORALITY	FEELINGS
siren	SEXY ALLURING BEAUTIFUL	FASCINATING IRRESISTIBLE	DANGEROUS		
enchantress		CHARMING BEWITCHING IRRESISTIBLE			
seductress	ALLURING		NAUGHTY		
coquette	ALLURING		VAIN BRASH PLAYFUL		
femme fatale	SEXY ALLURING BEAUTIFUL	MYSTERIOUS	DANGEROUS VILLAINOUS		
vamp	SEXY		DANGEROUS CRUEL		
Circe	ALLURING BEAUTIFUL	IRRESISTIBLE FASCINATING INTELLIGENT	DANGEROUS CRUEL		
Jezebel	ADORNED		DANGEROUS BRASH	PROMISCUOUS LEWD UNCHASTE	
Lorelei	BEAUTIFUL		DANGEROUS MERCILESS VINDICTIVE		DEJECTED UNHAPPY

Table 2: The list of conceptual elements assigned to the lexical items whose senses are associated with the conceptual category SEDUCTIVE FEMALE.

Having analysed a group of lexical items whose senses are connected with the conceptual category SEDUCTIVE FEMALE, there emerges a thought-provoking picture of a lady who – contrary to what might be anticipated – is not necessarily lewd or promiscuous. Hence, the metaphorical schema <A SEDUCTIVE FEMALE IS PROMISCUOUS> adverts only to one out of nine of the discussed words (*Jezebel*). Nevertheless, our investigation allows us to say that such a woman is almost always dangerous, and her purpose is to exploit and hurt males, thus we may formulate a universal metaphorical schema <A SEDUCTIVE FEMALE IS DANGEROUS> which refers to the majority of the discussed lexical items (*siren, femme fatale, vamp, Circe, Jezebel a*nd *Lorelei*). Furthermore, on the basis of our analysis, we may also say that – apart from being treacherous – seductresses are often cruel; hence we may formulate the following metaphorical schema <A SEDUCTIVE FEMALE IS CRUEL> (*vamp, Circe, Lorelei*).

As far as the physical appearance of such a woman is concerned, we may formulate such universal schemas as <A SEDUCTIVE FEMALE IS SEXY> (*siren, femme fatale, vamp*) or <A SEDUCTIVE FEMALE IS ALLURING AND/OR BEAUTIFUL> (e.g. *siren, coquette, Circe*). In this case, stereotypical thinking

according to which it is easier for a sexy woman to lure a man is reflected in our analysis. What seems to be conspicuous is the fact that only in one case (the analysis of *Lorelei*) was a woman unhappy because of a man. Thus, we cannot say that women who beguile men do so in revenge for having been hurt by them. As a result, the metaphorical schema <A SEDUCTIVE FEMALE IS DEJECTED> may be labelled as a unique one. Moreover, we may formulate the schema <A SEDUCTIVE FEMALE IS IRRESISTIBLE> (*siren, enchantress, Circe*).

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