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‘Bitch’ has a 1,000-year history. Its use has always been about power

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A few years ago, I was called a “bitch” in a workplace meeting simply for speaking up. The word stung, not just as a personal insult, but as part of a long tradition of policing women’s behaviour. Bitch is one of the most charged gendered slurs in English. And yet, today, it can be playful, empowering, or even celebratory.

This contradiction fascinated me. How did one word become both a weapon and a badge of honour? That’s the question I set out to answer in my book, Bitch: The Journey of a Word.

A word with teeth

Bitch has a long pedigree. First recorded more than 1,000 years ago as *bicce* (pronounced “bitch-eh”) in Old English, it began as a straightforward term for a female dog.

Almost immediately, though, it leapt into figurative use as an insult for women, comparable to calling someone a “slut” today. Interestingly, around the same time it became an insult for men as well.

The jump from “dog” to “bitch” as a slur was easy. In ancient Greece and Rome, the equivalent words for “dog” were already being used as a scathing insult – albeit used differently for both genders. Aimed at a woman, it usually implied disobedience, immodesty or shamelessness. Aimed at a man, it referred to human vices such as greed, arrogance and cowardice.

By the 18th century, bitch had become one of the most powerful gendered insults in the English language. British lexicographer Francis Grose’s Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue (1785) called it “the most offensive appellation that can be given to a woman”. In many ways, it still is.

Unlike other contemporaneous slurs such as “shrew” or “harlot”, which have mostly faded from use, bitch endured. Its survival lies in its flexibility: it has been used to chastise women as nagging, manipulative, or domineering – but also, more recently, to praise them as strong, ambitious or unapologetic. For example, “you’re a bitch” versus “you’re a boss bitch”.

The long life of the word shows us how language both mirrors and moulds society. Words can wound, but they can also be repurposed as symbols of power.

A entry for the word ‘bitch’ in a second edition copy of Samuel Johnson’s dictionary, published in 1765. Author provided

A weapon against women (and men)

Bitch has long been a catch-all insult towards women. It is most often aimed at those judged “unpleasant”, but in practice can be triggered by almost anything.

Crucially, a woman can be branded a bitch not only for negative traits, but also for traits considered positive in men, such as assertiveness, ambition, sexual confidence and authority. Powerful celebrities and politicians are frequent targets.

Aimed at men, the term carries a different sting. It implies weakness, submission, or effeminacy: a man who fails to perform masculinity “correctly”.

Within LGBTQIA+ communities, the word has been reimagined. It can be used playfully, or affectionately as a term of endearment. Outside those spaces, however, it often retains its edge as a term of abuse.

Language and power

In the 1960s, feminists began reclaiming bitch, aligning it with independence and power. Campaigns and pop culture, from American feminist Jo Freeman’s BITCH Manifesto to singer Meredith Brooks’ 1997 song Bitch, recast the insult into a badge of pride signifying strength and confidence. Viral phrases like “boss-ass bitch” continue this tradition of turning stigma into self-empowerment.

Yet, the word is not, and may never be, fully reclaimed. Its sharpest edge remains a slur. For many, bitch still retains its bite. Whether it lands as offensive or complimentary depends on context, tone and power dynamics.

Like other reclaimed words such as “gay” or “queer”, bitch can empower or hurt, depending on who wields it and who it is being directed at.

The word has spawned countless contemporary idioms, from “resting bitch face” to “life’s a bitch, and then you die”, and evolved playful modern spellings such as “biotch” to “biznatch”.

Its ubiquity shows how language reflects and reinforces attitudes about gender, power and behaviour. At the same time, it teaches a broader lesson: language is alive.

Words continually evolve along with society. And the struggle over who “owns” bitch mirrors broader struggles for gender equality. The word’s potential to empower or harm is a direct reflection of how society treats women.

The story of bitch

Over more than a millennium, bitch has survived censorship, bleeping and outright bans, only to return in ever-changing forms. Yet its original meaning remains: a female dog. All of its senses coexist, from insult to compliment, and from playful to profane. Its survival depends on its versatility and its unmistakable power to provoke.

True reclamation may depend less on the word itself and more on improving the conditions for women in modern society. Until then, bitch remains a powerful word: a sharp instrument of insult, and a mirror of our cultural values.

Ultimately, the journey of bitch shows us words are never neutral. And as our society changes, this 1,000-year-old word will continue to speak volumes.