Do You Really Mean That?

*Gay, queer,* and *retard* have created a great deal of controversy in today’s language. These words used to have different meanings than the way they are used today. These meanings have changed from positive to negative and are now considered offensive when directed towards someone. However, in today’s language it is acceptable to use all these words when the correct definition is used. By definition, these words mean a few different things. Each definition of the word is acceptable when used in a correct context and not directed at someone as an insult.

The meanings of these words today mean something totally different than what they used to mean. The Oxford-English Dictionary definitions of these words are as follows: *gay* is “bright or lively looking”, *queer* is “strange or odd”, and *retard* is “the fact of being slowed down or delayed.” The original meanings behind these words are acceptable to use because these definitions depict no offensive language. *Gay* is used in poetry and Christmas carols as its original meaning. In the Christmas song “Deck the Halls” a line of the song uses the word *gay*: “Don we now our *gay* apparel.” This usage is acceptable because it is used in the correct context to mean bright and lively looking. These words can be used in any context that agrees with this specific definition. For example, “the student’s action to obtain his/her degree was *retarded* because of obstacles that stood in their way,” is an acceptable example of the use of the word *retard* because in this scenario it means to be delayed. *Queer* is also used in poetry; one specific example is a Robert Frost poem. One line in the poem *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* says, “My little horse must think it *queer*.” Once again there is nothing wrong with this usage because it means strange or odd. Not many people nowadays use these words in
this manner, but the original definitions still stand and the words can be used as the definition entails.

Today these words have come to mean something very different from their original meanings. For example *gay* and *queer* are now used to mean homosexual and *retard* is someone who is cognitively impaired. The LGBT community appropriated both *gay* and *queer* to represent themselves since the terms were used as derogatory names for those who preferred the same sex. Author Gabriel Rotello used *queer* to generalize the LGBT community and they appropriated the term as such, “We’re here and we’re *queer.*” However, Rotello wishes he never used the term to generalize them because it stirred up anger between the young and the old generations. The younger generations accepted this term while the older generation did not because they had experienced so much oppression with the term. I understand being called *queer* as an insult while you’re just expressing your sexuality can be disgruntling and hurtful. Similarly, *gay* is used to represent the LGBT community and the community has accepted the term as their own. But since the LGBT community chose these words to represent themselves that does not mean others can’t use these words in their own way of choosing- by dictionary definition. The word *retard* was used by medical doctors to classify those who have a cognitive impairment. An article from USA Today called “Unkind Words Wound the Disabled and Their Caregivers” stated “there is nothing wrong with the word ‘retarded.' It comes from the Latin word that means ‘to make slow,’ and it was adopted by professionals in the mental health field.” It is unfair to ban a word because you will “adopt a new word for [it]…, then that word, too, would become taboo” (“Unkind Words Wound the Disabled and Their Caregivers”). All three of these words came to have negative meanings.
Since there are different definitions to these words, an offense may or may not be taken depending on which definition a person is using. According to Fairman, these words “can be insulting, friendly, identifying, or academic [when used] in different contexts” (527). The certain context chosen will stimulate a specific response when used. The use of these words becomes unacceptable when someone is directly insulting another person. When phrases are used such as “you’re retarded,” “you’re queer,” and “you’re gay” as an insult, they are completely unacceptable to use because you are directly insulting that person. If someone were to say, “you are so gay,” it can be taken as offensive because the person most likely means that the person is dumb, silly, or inadequate. These words have come to mean stupid or bad in today’s language and are used as insults towards others. It is the same as saying “you’re stupid” or any other words you use to insult another person. Since these terms can be used as insults towards someone, author Timothy Shriver believes that “it is much bigger than a word” and that the usage should be stopped because, specifically the word retard, “represents one of the most stubborn and persistent stigmas in history” (533). I agree that it is wrong to use these words to insult people; however, these are just words and the history behind a word doesn’t mean that word should be removed from our language. Just because someone calls another person stupid, as an insult, doesn’t mean we rid the word stupid from our vocabularies. People should be more respectful of one another and not call each other names. These words can be used as previous and current definitions but never as an insult toward another.

From a wider perspective, since these words have been used as slang to mean stupid or bad it is from this usage that sends a negative message. If people use these terms
to mean stupid then people will have a negative perspective on the word when they hear it used in the correct context. Zorn says *gay* “forces us to think of sexual preferences” instead of its other meanings. However, these words are simply just words. Ever hear of the saying “sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me?” A lot can be learned from this little saying, in that there’s no need to be offended by a word. The word only hurts because people allow it to hurt them. Author Gloria Naylor says: “the spoken word, like the written word, amounts to nonsensical arrangement of sounds or letters without a consensus that assigns ‘meaning’” (337). Naylor means that the words become offensive because we make them offensive by the contexts we use them in. A word is just a word but “it is the consensus that gives them their true power” (337). I agree that if you identify yourself as *gay*, *queer* or *retarded* and someone uses that word to mean stupid or bad it can be offensive. But they are not calling you, your sexuality or your mental capacity stupid; they are calling the situation stupid. These slang definitions are also acceptable to use because the word is not used in a way that is directly offensive to those who are associated with it. People who use these terms as slang “are not trying to be mean; they’re just oblivious” (“Unkind Words Wound the Disabled and Their Caregivers”). They don’t realize that they could be offending someone but on the other hand, the person getting offended doesn’t see how the person using the term is using it. A campaign called “Spread the Word to End the Word” was created to spread awareness about the word *retarded*. Campaigns like this are good because it educates the public; however, you can’t ban the use of a word because people will just find another word to use in place of it. There are scenarios where people are directly calling someone a name and trying to be hurtful, but these instances are incorrect and should never occur. It is
acceptable to use these terms to describe a situation but never to be used to insult someone. All definitions of these terms can be used in the correct context and no offense is necessary.

In today’s language there is controversy over the use *gay*, *queer*, and *retard*. These words have a few definitions and all definitions are acceptable to use when used correctly. These words should never be used as a direct insult towards someone. When the word is taken out of context is when someone gets offended but there’s no need to be offended by a word. Words can mean different things to all people but words are just words. It is in the context where the intention and consequences give these words their meaning. Thus when people realize that a word can never hurt them if they don’t allow it to, then there will not be anymore offensive language.
Works Cited


