

## **“B-I-T-C-H, Bitcha, Biotch: An Analysis of “Bitch” as Destabilized Social Linguistic Referent in *BtVS* and *Angel*”**

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Almost from its inception, Whedon Studies has inspired scholars from multiple disciplines to inquire into the use of language and linguistic patterns in the Whedonverse. These studies have drawn attention to how language functions as a purveyor, and sometimes creator, of economic, social, gender, age-based, cultural, or racial demarcations within the various texts. From Michael Adams’ seminal *Slayer Slang* to Susan Mandala’s relatively recent “Representing the Future: Chinese and Codeswitching in *Firefly*,” the unique linguistic patterns of individual characters and the ‘verse as a whole have furthered the accepted notion that Whedon’s shows routinely realign what viewers perceive as normative—especially when it comes to language. One particular linguistic sign has not, however, received the critical attention that it needs—“bitch.”

The term “bitch” is especially ripe for scholarship because unlike many gendered terms that currently exist in at least a limited state of linguistic stability, “bitch” does not. As a linguistic sign, the term has historically signified its user as aligned with misogynist attitudes. The term has ranged in meaning as a linguistic stand-in for a sexual woman, a woman of nasty disposition, and a woman who challenges patriarchy. Insiders to feminism have tried, with limited success, to reclaim the term. Notwithstanding this marginal success, the attempt has created a troubling of the linguistic sign that has relevance for Whedon scholarship, particularly as we consider that the majority of characters in *BtVS* and *Angel* are associated with the term at some point, either as the linguist user or subject. Surprisingly, its usage is not restricted to male-female interaction; male-male interaction as derogatory emasculation; or even character-character usage (sometimes instead becoming a self-descriptor).

The variety of usages that “bitch” has throughout both series suggests a deeply ambivalent and de-stabilized linguistic sign that mirrors the term’s destabilization in the English language at large. What that means for Whedon scholars, perhaps, remains to be seen, but what is clear is that “bitch” as a linguistic sign in *BtVS* and *Angel* projects a marked ambiguity about gender, power, and language that needs additional attention, which my paper will begin to provide.