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Terms of Endearment

Upon investigating the use of forms of address, researchers have concluded that the social definition of a term of address does not necessarily reflect that word’s literal dictionary meaning. (Dickey 1997). This would seem to be evident upon examination of different terms of endearment, which are forms of indexicality (they point to a particular relationship between a speaker and addressee), as it’s not uncommon to find an instance of referral to an individual as “sweetheart,” “baby,” or even “pumpkin.” The question examined here is what particular relationship between speaker and addressee supports such terms of endearment? In what situations are they acceptable?

Corpus of Contemporary American English is used as a data source for this research, focusing on unprompted conversations between different pairs of speakers and addressees, with a variety of relationships between them. Searches performed focused on traits of both speaker and addressee, along with responses of addressee, to gauge a level of appropriateness based on character traits.

Examination of this topic will lead to a better understanding of the dividing line between where it is acceptable to use different endearment terms, and where it becomes unsuitable, or even offensive. What makes the sentence [1] “How’s it going baby?” fitting when used between a couple, but when the speaker is a stranger, it can become inappropriate? This topic is also fundamental to understanding the evolution of different words in relation to terms of endearment; it can assist in the examination of the literal meaning of certain words and how they relate to the word’s contextual use.