Kitty Bennet

Ms. Vander Heiden

Brit LitA

11 September 2018

“What’s up, dude?”

In the popular movie *Finding Nemo*, the hippie sea turtle Crush asks Nemo’s dad, “Dude? Dude? Focus dude…Dude?” With a slow, gravelly voice and a laid back demeanor, Crush exhibits qualities of the stereotypical surfer “dude,” the beach bum. Nothing irritates him; he easily manages the fast-moving current. In *Finding Nemo*, “dude” is the relaxed, gnarly term for “guy.” It’s a way to greet a new acquaintance—if you’re a surfing turtle. Yet, “dude” hasn’t always conjured images of beach bums and slow-speaking animated turtles. Its definitions have morphed drastically from the early nineteenth century to today. Ironically, the usage and evolution of “dude” has changed from an insulting label to a very informal noun or interjection.

Although the current usage of “dude” isn’t popular in 2018, the term is still used in informal settings between friends. In Minnesota, people—predominantly men—use the moniker “dude” when speaking to friends. The label has a slightly uneducated connotation attached to it—a lawyer wouldn’t say it in the courtroom, a news anchor wouldn’t refer to her counterpart as it, and the Queen of England definitely wouldn’t be caught saying it. Friends, sometimes bros, say it to friends—“Dude, where’s my car?[[1]](#footnote-1)” “Dude, I don’t know.” Merriam-Webster confirms the definition: “fellow, guy.” According to J.J. Gould in *The Atlantic* article “A Brief History of Dude,” context is everything. The term can imply “solidarity without intimacy” (Gould). Although men use the term more often, women employ it, too. In addition to using “dude” as a noun, the word can also be used to express disbelief or surprise. For example, in response to someone proclaiming, “I jumped off a cliff!” someone might say, “Duuuude” to imply how wonderfully awesome jumping off a cliff can be. On the other hand, someone might break a social norm or do something stupid, and a good friend will say knowingly, “Dude.” Gould confirms that someone can set “you straight with a firm and sober *Dude*” (Gould). Today, people can employ “dude” as a noun to label their acquaintance and as an interjection with manifold connotations.

However, the “dude” label used to have a much more formal—and judgmental—definition. The word has close ties to the word “dandy,” according to an article entitled “What’s Up, Dude?” from *Scholastic Action*. A “dandy” was “someone who loves style and fashion” (“What’s Up…”). The term “dandy” was mocking, though—it implied that a young man was *overly* concerned with his dress and appearance. He was trying too hard. Today, we might label such a person as “hipster.” In the popular song “Yankee Doodle Dandee,” as Arika Okrent’s article in *Slate* entitled “Mystery Solved: The Etymology of *Dude*” points out, the lyrics explain how the dandy “Stuck a feather in his cap and called it macaroni” (Okrent). To imitate the cultured young British men, aspiring American men would stick a feather in their caps. “Doodle” quickly became “dood” and then “dude” (Okrent). In addition to being a judgmental label for a wannabe-gentleman, “dude” more generally morphed into meaning a city-dweller. Merriam-Webster’s second definition is “a city dweller unfamiliar with life on the range, especially an Easterner in the west.” Okrent explains, “It later came to stand for clueless city folk (who go to dude ranches)” (Okrent). Today in the west, we still have dude ranches. “Dude” originally referred to anyone visiting from the east and could signify tourists who simply stayed on ranches or those who hired western guides to teach them the ways of the west. Thus, “dude” used to refer pejoratively to men’s fashion and evolved to disparage someone’s geographic origins.

Oddly, “dude” has evolved from being a snooty judgment to being a casual, relaxed term for “friend.” A dude used to be a try-hard from the east coast, but today he is a chill surfer lying on a beach in the west. Although “dude” might not be wildly popular among today’s youth, Crush the turtle and Ashton Kutcher have famously used the term. Plus, today’s definition is its most positive—people want to have their dudes close by, so they can greet each other with simple phrases like, “What’s up, dude?”

Works Cited

Gould, J.J. “A Brief History of Dude.” *The Atlantic*, Nov. 2013.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2013/11/dude-transcends/309528/>. Accessed 1 Sept. 2018.

Okrent, Arika. “Mystery Solved: The Etymology of *Dude*.” *Slate.com*, 5 Nov. 2013. http://www.slate.com/blogs/lexicon\_valley/2013/11/05/dude\_etymology\_of\_the\_word\_is\_traced\_to\_doodle\_as\_in\_yankee\_doodle\_dandy.html. Accessed 1 Sept. 2018.

“What's Up, Dude?” *Scholastic Action*, vol. 38, no. 10, 04 May 2015, p. 18. EBSCO*host*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mih&AN=102370671&site=src\_ic-live&scope=site. Accessed 28 Aug. 2018.

1. The actual title of a comedy from 2000 starring Ashton Kutcher. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)